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WE'RE ALREADY LIVING IN THE METAVERSE

By

MEGAN GARBER

REALITY IS BLURRED.
BOREDOM IS INTOLERABLE.
AND EVERYTHING IS ENTERTAINMENT.

VISIT…

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We’ve Lost the Plot

Our constant need for entertainment has blurred the line between fiction and reality—on television, in American politics, and in our everyday lives.

by Megan Garber

This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic*, Monday through Friday. Sign up for it here.*

“Do a Dance”

The trend started, as so many do, on TikTok. Amazon customers, watching packages arrive through Ring doorbell devices, asked the people making the deliveries to dance for the camera. The workers—drivers for “Earth’s most customer-centric company” and therefore highly vulnerable to customer ratings—complied. The Ring owners posted the videos. “I said bust a dance move for the camera and he did it!” read one caption, as an anonymous laborer shimmied, listlessly. Another customer wrote her request in chalk on the path leading up to her door. DO A DANCE, the ground ordered, accompanied by a happy face and the word SMILE. The driver did as instructed. His command performance received more than 1.3 million likes.

Watching that video, I did what I often do when taking in the news these days: I stared in disbelief, briefly wondered about the difference between the dystopian and the merely weird, and went about my business. But I kept

thinking about those clips, posted by customers who saw themselves as directors and populated by people who, in the course of doing one job, had been stage-managed into another.

Dystopias often share a common feature: Amusement, in their skewed worlds, becomes a means of captivity rather than escape. George Orwell's *1984* had the telescreen, a Ring-like device that surveilled and broadcast at the same time. The totalitarian regime of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* burned books, yet encouraged the watching of television. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* described the "feelies"—movies that, embracing the tactile as well as the visual, were "far more real than reality." In 1992, Neal Stephenson's sci-fi novel *Snow Crash* imagined a form of virtual entertainment so immersive that it would allow people, essentially, to live within it. He named it the metaverse.

In the years since, the metaverse has leaped from science fiction and into our lives. Microsoft, Alibaba, and ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, have all made significant investments in virtual and augmented reality. Their approaches vary, but their goal is the same: to transform entertainment from something we choose, channel by channel or stream by stream or feed by feed, into something we inhabit. In the metaverse, the promise goes, we will finally be able to do what science fiction foretold: live *within* our illusions.

No company has placed a bigger bet on this future than Mark Zuckerberg's. In October 2021, he rebranded Facebook as Meta to plant a flag in this notional landscape. For its new logo, the company redesigned the infinity symbol, all twists with no end. The choice was apt: The aspiration of the renamed company is to engineer a kind of endlessness. Why have mere users when you can have residents?

For now, Meta's promise of immersive entertainment seems as clunky as the goggles required to access all that limitless fun. But the promise is also redundant: Zuckerberg positions himself as an innovator, but the environment that Meta is marketing already exists. Where were those Amazon drivers doing their dancing, if not in the metaverse?

In the future, the writers warned, we will surrender ourselves to our entertainment. We will become so distracted and dazed by our fictions that

we'll lose our sense of what is real. We will make our escapes so comprehensive that we cannot free ourselves from them. The result will be a populace that forgets how to think, how to empathize with one another, even how to govern and be governed.

That future has already arrived. We live our lives, willingly or not, within the metaverse.

A Vaster Wasteland

When scholars warn of the United States becoming a "post-truth" society, they typically focus on the ills that poison our politics: the misinformation, the mistrust, the president who apparently thought he could edit a hurricane with a Sharpie. But the encroachments of a post-truth world are matters of culture as well.

In 1961, Newton Minow, just appointed by President John F. Kennedy to lead the Federal Communications Commission, gave a speech before a convocation of TV-industry leaders. He was blunt. The executives, he said, were filling the air with "a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, Western bad men, Western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons." They were turning TV into "a vast wasteland."

Shadowland: Megan Garber on how the mechanisms of reality TV taught us to trust no one

The epithet stuck. Minow's speech is best remembered for its criticism of TV, but it was also a prescient acknowledgment of the medium's power. TV beamed its illusions into home after home, brain after brain. It shaped people's views of the world even as it distracted them from reality.

Minow made his speech in an era when television was contained to three broadcast channels, to certain hours of the day, and, for that matter, to the living room. Today, of course, screens are everywhere; the entertainment environment is so vast, you can get lost in it. When we finish one series, the streaming platforms humbly suggest what we might like next. When the

algorithm gets it right, we binge, disappearing into a fictional world for hours or even days at a time, less couch potato than lotus-eater.

Social media, meanwhile, beckons from the same devices with its own promises of unlimited entertainment. Instagram users peer into the lives of friends and celebrities alike, and post their own touched-up, filtered story for others to consume. TikTok's endless talent show is so captivating that members of the intelligence community fear China could use the platform to spy on Americans or to disseminate propaganda—feelies as a weapon of war. Even the less photogenic Twitter invites users to enter an alternate realm. As the *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat has observed, "It's a place where people form communities and alliances, nurture friendships and sexual relationships, yell and flirt, cheer and pray." It's "a place people don't just visit but inhabit."

Each invitation to be entertained reinforces an impulse: to seek diversion whenever possible, to avoid tedium at all costs.

I've inhabited Twitter in that way too—just as I've inhabited Instagram and Hulu and Netflix. I don't want to question the value of entertainment itself—that would be foolish and, in my case, deeply hypocritical. But I do want to question the hold that all of the immersive amusement is gaining over my life, and maybe yours.

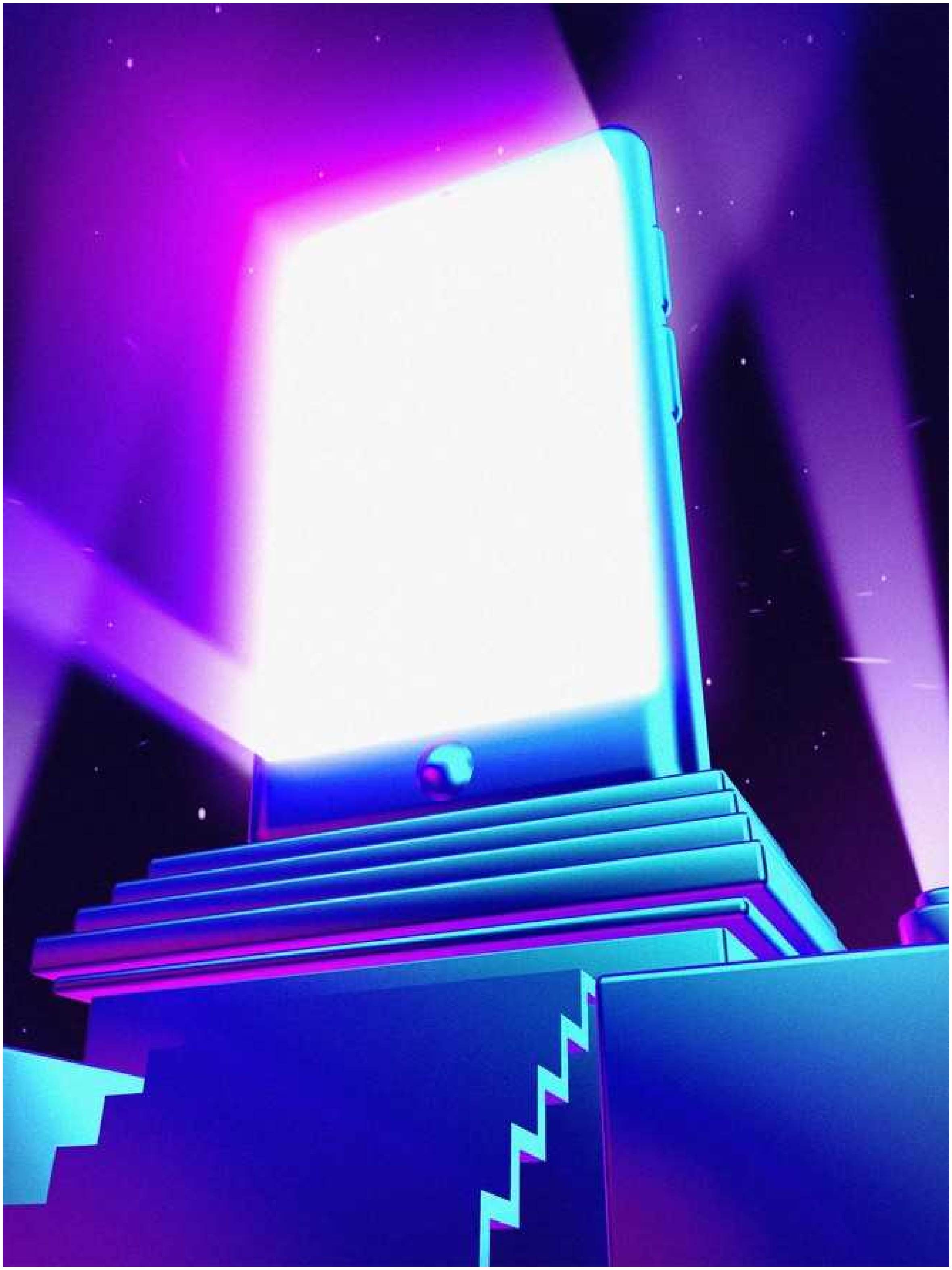
Dwell in this environment long enough, and it becomes difficult to process the facts of the world through anything except entertainment. We've become so accustomed to its heightened atmosphere that the plain old *real* version of things starts to seem dull by comparison. A weather app recently sent me a push notification offering to tell me about "interesting storms." I didn't know I needed my storms to be interesting. Or consider an email I received from TurboTax. It informed me, cheerily, that "we've pulled together this year's best tax moments and created your own personalized tax story." Here was the entertainment imperative at its most absurd: Even my Form 1040 comes with a highlight reel.

Such examples may seem trivial, harmless—brands being brands. But each invitation to be entertained reinforces an impulse: to seek diversion whenever possible, to avoid tedium at all costs, to privilege the dramatized

version of events over the actual one. To live in the metaverse is to expect that life should play out as it does on our screens. And the stakes are anything but trivial. In the metaverse, it is not shocking but entirely fitting that a game-show host and Twitter personality would become president of the United States.

In the years since Minow delivered his speech, the language of television has come to saturate the way Americans talk about the world around us. People who are deluded, we say, have “lost the plot”; people who have become pariahs have been “canceled.” In earlier ages, people attributed their circumstances to the will of gods and the whims of fate; we attribute ours to the artistic choices of “the writers” and lament that we may be living through America’s final season. These are jokes, of course, but they have an uneasy edge. They suggest a creeping realization that we truly have come to inhabit our entertainment.

Gaslit



Gaslit

Last May, 19 children and two of their teachers were murdered at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. The next day, Quinta Brunson, the creator and star of the ABC sitcom *Abbott Elementary*, shared a message—one of many—that she'd received in response to the massacre: a request from a fan that she write a school-shooting story line into her comedy. "People are that deeply removed from demanding more from the politicians they've elected and are instead demanding 'entertainment,'" Brunson wrote on Twitter. "I can't ask 'are yall ok' anymore because the answer is 'no.'"

Brunson's frustration was understandable. Yet it's also hard to blame the fans who, as they grieved a real shooting, sought comfort in a fictional one. They have been conditioned to expect that the news will instantaneously become entertainment.

Read: A grim new low for internet sleuthing

Almost as soon as a big event happens, a production company repurposes it as a pseudo-fiction. In 2019, two Boeing 737 Max airplanes crashed, killing 346 people; by early 2020, *Variety* was announcing, "Boeing 737 Max Disaster Series in Works." In July 2020, *The Hollywood Reporter* shared that Adam McKay's next project at HBO would "take on the timeliest of subjects: the race to develop a vaccine for COVID-19." In January 2021, Reddit users collaborated to inflate the stock of the video-game store GameStop; a week later, MGM announced that it had landed the film rights to a book proposal—a book *proposal*, not an actual book—about the story. In the metaverse, history repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as wry dramedy on HBO Max.

Producers have been ripping plots from the headlines for as long as there have been headlines to rip them from. The difference today is the speed and the scale of the conversion. There are commercial reasons for this frenzy of optioning. In general, plundering reality is much easier and cheaper than inventing something new. The streaming platforms wouldn't keep making the series, however, if viewers didn't watch them. And watching them can be disorienting.

The tagline at the start of every episode of *Inventing Anna*, the 2022 Netflix series, neatly sums up the approach of the new "ripped from the headlines"

genre: “This whole story is completely true. Except for all of the parts that are totally made up.” *Inventing Anna* is the lavishly fictionalized story of Anna Sorokin (more commonly known by her alias, Anna Delvey), a Russian woman who pretended to be a German heiress to gain the trust and then the money of rich people in New York City. It is a tale about lies so brazen that they revealed some well-disguised truths—about the magical thinking of high finance, about America’s enduring susceptibility to the con artist.

Inventing Anna is based on a 2018 *New York* magazine story by the journalist Jessica Pressler. The show weaves the article—lyrically rendered but truthfully told—into its own version of the story. *Inventing Anna* is by turns flashy, cheeky, and insightful. It operates in the realm that the postmodernists call hyperreality: Its colors are saturated; its pace is frenetic; it plays, sometimes, less as a drama than as a music video. Most of all, the show sells the idea that an unstable relationship between fact and fiction is its own kind of fun.

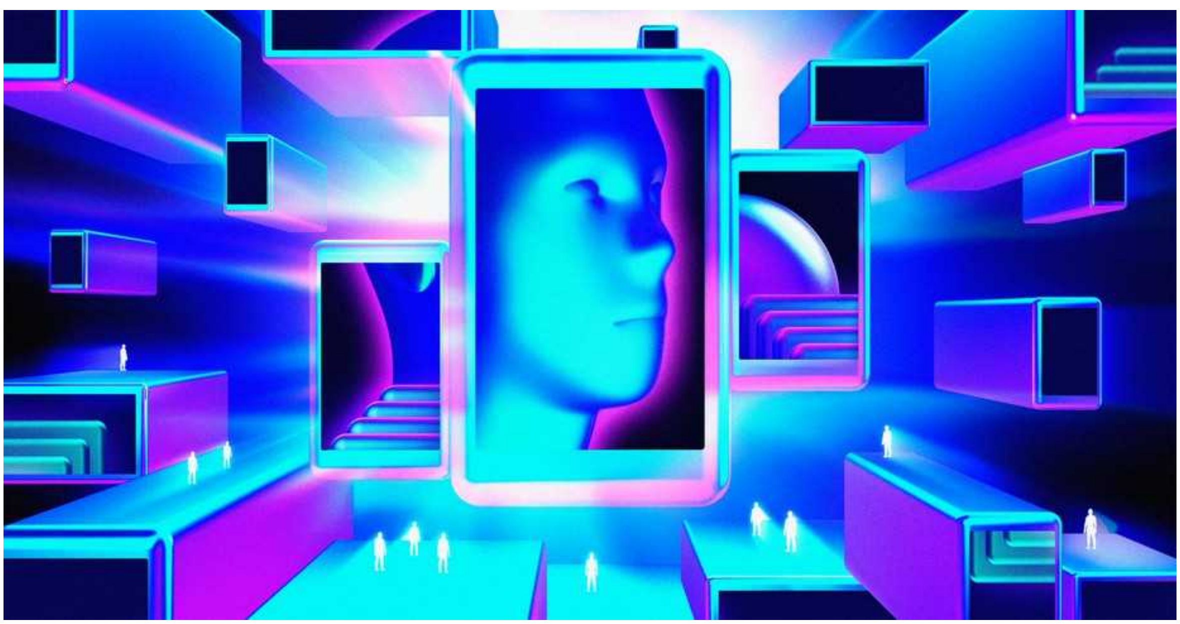
In that, *Inventing Anna* is typical. *WeCrashed*, *Super Pumped: The Battle for Uber*, *The Dropout*, and many other series repurpose high-profile news events as glossy amusements. *Gaslit*, *Winning Time*, *A Friend of the Family*, *Pam & Tommy*, and *American Crime Story* do similar work with history so recent, it can barely be considered history at all. Many of them are self-consciously products of “prestige TV,” and many of them are quite good: smartly written, slickly produced, and performed by talented actors.

A life so full that it gets optioned: the new American dream.

The shows also deliver a voyeuristic thrill that can be difficult for even the most thoroughly reported and artfully told journalism to rival. The promise of the metaverse has always been the ability to inhabit realms that would otherwise be closed to us: In a recent ad, Meta’s Quest 2 headset transports one young woman into an NFL scrum and another into the Iron Man suit. A series like *The Crown* provides a similar experience. We sit with the Royal Family in their bedrooms. We see them fighting. We see them weeping. This is a biopic about lives still being lived.

Of course, such voyeurism is possible only because the shows are not bound by the rules of nonfiction. Like so many entries in the genre, *The Crown* combines finicky photorealism and breezy artistic license. The series offers a stitch-by-stitch re-creation of the “revenge dress” that Princess Diana debuted after Prince Charles’s infidelity came to light; it also fabricates dialogue, events, and entire characters. In 2020, the United Kingdom’s culture secretary asked Netflix to add a disclaimer to the show making clear that it is, fundamentally, a work of fiction. Netflix declined, saying it was confident that viewers knew the show was fiction. Yet its executives surely understand that the series is appealing precisely because it presents its fictions with the swagger of settled fact.

One night this past fall, my partner and I were watching an episode of *Gaslit* (about the life of the Watergate celebrity Martha Mitchell). We were both side-screening with our phones, and at some point we realized we were doing the exact same thing: combing Wikipedia to find out whether the scene we’d just watched had actually happened. In this, we were missing the point. When you’re watching a show like *Gaslit* or *The Crown*, you are supposed to accept that the story is true in a broad sense, not a specific one. You are not meant to question the difference between nonfiction and a story that’s been “lightly” fictionalized. And you are definitely not supposed to be on Wikipedia, trying to cross-reference the real history against the one you’re seeing on Starz.



Here my TV-loving self interrupts, indignantly and a little defensively: *It's just TV. It's all in good fun.* And that's true. I enjoyed *Gaslit*. And when *Super Pumped* cast Uma Thurman as Arianna Huffington and gave her one apparent note—*more camp*—I had no choice but to watch. Taken together, though, such series start to destabilize our sense of what is true and what has been invented—or elided—to tell a good story.

Consider the Theranos scandal. Elizabeth Holmes's company was covered meticulously in real time by journalists, most prominently at *The Wall Street Journal*, and the full arc of her deceptions was described masterfully by the *Journal*'s John Carreyrou in his book, *Bad Blood*. But the fraud has proved so irresistible that it is now also the subject of a documentary, a true-crime podcast called *The Dropout*, a Hulu drama also called *The Dropout*, and, soon, an Adam McKay feature film, adapted from Carreyrou's *Bad Blood*, which will also be called *Bad Blood*. The consumer of all this news and entertainment can be forgiven for mixing up where she got her facts—and whether they're facts at all.

In a surreal twist, the fictionalization of the Theranos debacle has now become part of the nonfiction story line. Last March, the fraud trial of the former Theranos COO Sunny Balwani was complicated when two of the potential jurors who had been selected to hear the case were dismissed; they had seen episodes of *The Dropout* and might have been prejudiced by its depiction of the events at issue in the trial.

In the 1990s, media critics worried—rightly—that the news was becoming frivolous, whether in the form of histrionic shoutfests like *Crossfire*, lurid news magazines like *Dateline*, or the overheated coverage of the O. J. Simpson trial. Then came a boom in entertainment that pretended to be news and to many viewers was indistinguishable from it: Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, Samantha Bee. Today, the critiques that the news channels were obsessed with ratings, or that too many people had abandoned the 6 o'clock news for *The Daily Show*, seem quaint. There is no longer any distinction: The news has become entertainment, and entertainment has become the news.

In January 2021, Britain's Sky TV announced that Kenneth Branagh would be starring as Boris Johnson in a miniseries about the coronavirus pandemic.

Asked about the role in September 2022—asked, in particular, about the logic of airing a history of an event that was still unfolding—Branagh demurred. “I think these events are unusual,” he said, “and part of what we must do is acknowledge them.”

Neither a pandemic that has now killed more than 200,000 Britons nor a leader who bungled his way through the disaster was in danger of going unacknowledged by the BBC or *The Times* of London. Yet Branagh’s comment was telling. The rise of these hyperreal TV shows coincides with the decline of the institutions that report on the world as it is. The semi-fictions stake their claims while journalism flails. We have gradually accommodated ourselves to the idea that if an event doesn’t become a limited series or a movie, it hasn’t happened. When news breaks, we shrug. We’ll wait for the miniseries. And take for granted that its version of the story will be true—except for the parts that are totally made up.

The Main Character

By the mid-20th century, the historian Warren Susman argued, a great shift was taking place. American values had traditionally emphasized a collection of qualities we might shorthand as “character”: honesty, diligence, an abiding sense of duty. The rise of mass media changed those terms, Susman wrote. In the media-savvy and consumption-oriented society that Americans were building, people came to value—and therefore demand—what Susman called “personality”: charm, likability, the talent to entertain. “The social role demanded of all in the new Culture of Personality was that of a performer,” Susman wrote. “Every American was to become a performing self.”

That demand remains. Now, though, the value is not merely interpersonal charm, but the ability to broadcast it to mass audiences. Social media has truly made each of us a performing self. “All the world’s a stage” was once a metaphor; today, it’s a dull description of life in the metaverse. As the journalist Neal Gabler foresaw in his book *Life: The Movie*, performance, as a language but also as a value, bleeds into nearly every facet of experience.

A recent H&M ad campaign promised that the brand would make sure that “you are the main character of each day.” In September, my partner booked

a hotel room for a weekend trip; the confirmation email vowed that the stay would allow him to “craft your next story.” My iPhone is now in the habit of transforming photographs and videos from my camera roll into mini-movies. The bespoke videos come with a soundtrack selected by the operating system. They also come unprompted: I was recently served up a slideshow, set to strings that Ken Burns might appreciate, of pictures I’d taken of my dog. The aim, of course, is commercial. What better way to encourage customers to be loyal than to tell them their life should be a movie? A life so full that it gets optioned: the new American dream.

QAnon adherents live in a universe of fiction; they trust, above all, in the anonymous showrunner who is writing and directing and producing reality.

Or the new American nightmare. On Twitter, “the main character” is shorthand for the person who will be a given day’s subject of communal scorn. The strangers who pile on, often with vehemence, may be reacting to the target’s legitimate failings or merely to perceived ones. Regardless, they may be engaging in what the psychologist John Suler has described as the online disinhibition effect: the tendency for people in digital spaces to act in ways they never would offline. The disinhibition might originate in an assumption that the digital world differs from the “real” world, or in a sense that online interactions amount to a low-stakes game. But it can lead people to treat the humans on the other side of the screen as not human—not real—at all.

Last July, while Lilly Simon was commuting on the subway in New York, a stranger began filming her without her knowledge or consent. This was when monkeypox, recently declared a global health emergency, was spreading in the city. Simon has a genetic condition that causes tumors to grow at her nerve endings; some of the growths are visible on her skin. The tumors are usually benign, but can lead to painful complications. They are not contagious. The person recording her knew none of this. Instead, the videographer zoomed in on Simon’s legs and arms, analyzing her, and posted the results of their “investigation” on TikTok. Simon, after learning of the video’s existence, posted a reply. “I will not let any of y’all reverse any years of therapy and healing that I had to endure to deal with the condition,” she said in it. In short order, her response went viral, the original

video was taken down, and Simon gave an interview about the experience to *The New York Times*.

A happy ending, of sorts, to an otherwise grim tale of what life can be like in the metaverse: A person, simply trying to get from one place to another, is transformed into a reluctant star of a movie she didn't know she was in. The dynamics are simple, and stark. The people on our screens look like characters, so we begin to treat them like characters. And characters are, ultimately, expendable; their purpose is to serve the story. When their service is no longer required, they can be written off the show.

Insurrection for the 'Gram

Disinhibition may begin in the online world, but it doesn't stay there. The dystopian aspects of the metaverse take on a political dimension, though not necessarily in the way that the 20th-century visionaries anticipated. Those writers imagined a populace pacified by empty entertainments. They didn't foresee that the telescreen might instead incite them to political violence.

My colleague Tom Nichols has argued that one of the primary motivations driving the January 6 insurrectionists was boredom—and a sense that they had a right to be the heroes of their own American Revolution. Certainly, to watch the attack live on TV, as I did that day, was to be struck by how many of the people ransacking the Capitol were having a grand old time. They posed for (incriminating) photos. They livestreamed their vandalism for their followers. They were doing insurrection for the 'gram. Indeed, a striking number of the participants performed their sedition dressed as superheroes. Several tied Trump 2020 flags around their neck, the wrinkled nylon streaking behind them as they plundered.

Some insurrectionists dressed as heroes from another fictional universe: not Marvel or DC, but QAnon. The origins of the QAnon conspiracy theory are convoluted, and its ongoing appeal has a range of explanations. But it has thrived, at least in part, because it is so well suited to the metaverse. Its adherents have filter-bubbled and siloed and red-pilled themselves so completely that they live in a universe of fiction; they trust, above all, in the anonymous showrunner who is writing and directing and producing reality, every once in a while dropping tantalizing clues about what might happen in

the next episode. The hero of the show is Donald Trump, the man who has mastered, like perhaps no one else in American history, TV's powers of manipulation. Its villains are the members of the "deep state," thousands of demi-humans united in their pedophiliac designs on America's children.

The efforts to hold the instigators of the insurrection to account have likewise unfolded as entertainment. "Opinion: January 6 Hearings Could Be a Real-Life Summer Blockbuster," read a CNN headline in May—the unstated corollary being that if the hearings failed at the box office, they would fail at their purpose. ("Lol no one is watching this," the account of the Republican members of the House Judiciary Committee tweeted as the hearings were airing, attempting to suggest such a failure.)

The hearings did not fail, though; on the contrary, the first one was watched by some 20 million people—ratings similar to those earned by a *Sunday Night Football* broadcast. And the success came in part because the January 6 committee so ably turned its findings into compelling TV. The committee summoned well-spoken and, in many cases, telegenic witnesses. It made a point of transforming that day's chaos into a comprehensive plot. Its production was so successful that *The New York Times* included the hearings on its list of 2022's best TV shows.

The committee understood that for people to care about January 6—for people to take an interest in the greatest coup attempt in American history—the violence and treason had to be translated into that universal American language: a good show.



In September, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis arranged for a group of people seeking asylum in the U.S. to board airplanes. They were told that

housing, financial assistance, and employment would be waiting for them when they landed. Instead, the planes flew to Martha's Vineyard, where there was nothing waiting for the confused travelers except a group of equally confused locals. But those locals gave the travelers food and shelter. Immigration lawyers came to help. Journalists obtained copies of the brochures that had been handed out to the asylum seekers, and informed the public of the series of false promises through which human beings had been turned into props.

The send-them-to-the-Vineyard plan had been fueled by TV. After Texas Governor Greg Abbott began busing migrants to places where they would supposedly become a burden to Democrats, "shipping migrants" became a regular topic of conversation on the morning show *Fox & Friends*, and Fox News in general. The hosts filled their airtime joking about the conveyances that would be necessary to ship people to the Vineyard. The idea was repeated so steadily that, as often happens, the joke became the plan, and then the plan became the reality, and then the asylum seekers, desperate and misled, were sent like Amazon Prime packages to a place selected because Barack Obama vacations there.

And the producers of the whole thing, rather than questioning the premise of their show after it did little besides expose a community rallying to help people in need, instead promised more performances. Senator Ted Cruz—whose father, as it happens, sought asylum in the U.S.—announced that another group of asylum seekers would be shipped to Joe Biden's vacation spot. ("Rehoboth Beach, Delaware next," he said.) Abbott continued busing migrants out of Texas—this time the drop-off location was in front of Vice President Kamala Harris's Washington, D.C., residence. The National Republican Senatorial Committee, not to be outdone, brought audience participation to the show: A fundraising email asked recipients where Republican governors should "ship" migrants next.

"The propagandist's purpose," Aldous Huxley observed, "is to make one set of people forget that certain other sets of people are human." Donald Trump had a habit of demeaning his opponents, en masse, as "vicious, horrible" people. The images have only grown more hallucinatory. In September, Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene told a gathering of young people in

Texas that her Democratic colleagues are “kind of night creatures, like witches and vampires and ghouls.”

The rhetoric may seem absurd, but it serves a purpose. This is language designed to dehumanize. And it is language that has gained traction. Last year, the Public Religion Research Institute published an analysis of QAnon’s hold over Americans. The group asked nearly 20,000 survey respondents whether they agreed with the QAnon belief that “the government, media, and financial worlds are controlled by Satan-worshiping pedophiles.” Nearly a sixth—16 percent—said they did.

“I’m a Real Person”

In his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, the critic Neil Postman described a nation that was losing itself to entertainment. What Newton Minow had called “a vast wasteland” in 1961 had, by the Reagan era, led to what Postman diagnosed as a “vast descent into triviality.” Postman saw a public that confused authority with celebrity, assessing politicians, religious leaders, and educators according not to their wisdom, but to their ability to entertain. He feared that the confusion would continue. He worried that the distinction that informed all others—fact or fiction—would be obliterated in the haze.

In late 2022, *The New York Times* revealed that George Santos, a newly elected Republican representative from Long Island, had invented or wildly inflated not just his résumé (a familiar political sin) but his entire biography. Santos had, in essence, run as a fictional character and won. His lies and obfuscations—about his education, his employment history, his charitable work, even his religion—were shocking in their brazenness. They were also met, by many, with a collective shrug. “Everyone fabricates their résumé,” one of his constituents told the *Times*. Another vowed her continued support: “He was never untruthful with me,” she said. Their reactions are reminiscent of the Obama voter who explained to *Politico*, in 2016, why he would be switching his allegiances: “At least Trump is fun to watch.”

These are Postman’s fears in action. They are also Hannah Arendt’s. Studying societies held in the sway of totalitarian dictators—the very real dystopias of the mid-20th century—Arendt concluded that the ideal subjects

of such rule are not the committed believers in the cause. They are instead the people who come to believe in everything and nothing at all: people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction no longer exists.

A republic requires citizens; entertainment requires only an audience. In 2020, a former health official worried aloud that “viewers will get tired of another season of coronavirus.” The concern, it turned out, was warranted: Americans have struggled to make sense of a pandemic that refuses to conform to a tidy narrative structure—digestible plots, cathartic conclusions.

Life in the metaverse brings an aching contradiction: We have never been able to share so much of ourselves. And, as study after study has shown, we have never felt more alone. Fictions, at their best, *expand* our ability to understand the world through other people’s eyes. But fiction can flatten, too. Recall how many Americans, in the grim depths of the pandemic, refused to understand the wearing of masks as anything but “virtue signaling”—the performance of a political view, rather than a genuine public-health measure. Note how many pundits have dismissed well-documented tragedies—children massacred at school, families separated by a callous state—as the work of “crisis actors.” In a functioning society, “I’m a real person” goes without saying. In ours, it is a desperate plea.

This could be how we lose the plot. This could be the somber finale of *America: The Limited Series*. Or perhaps it’s not too late for us to do what the denizens of the fictional dystopias could not: look up from the screens, seeing the world as it is and one another as we are. Be transported by our entertainment but not bound by it.

“Are you not entertained?” Maximus, the hero of *Gladiator*, yells to the Roman throngs who treat his pain as their show. We might see something of ourselves in both the captive warrior and the crowd. We might feel his righteous fury. We might recognize their fun. We have never been more entertained. That is our luxury—and our burden.

This article appears in the March 2023 print edition with the headline “We’re Already in the Metaverse.” When you buy a book using a link on this page, we receive a commission. Thank you for supporting The Atlantic.

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The Man Who Moves Markets

Carson Block uses covert techniques to uncover fraud for profit. Now he’s under investigation himself. Is he the hero of Wall Street, or the villain?

by Evan Hughes



This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic*, Monday through Friday. Sign up for it here.*

When the investor Carson Block arrived for an appointment at the Pierre hotel, in Manhattan, in 2017, he knew he was about to meet with an impostor. In the elegant Rotunda Room, surrounded by marble columns and a sky-blue mural, Block sat across from the dark-haired man who had extended the invitation. A security team that Block had brought with him fanned out around the hotel. After fielding a few pointed questions from the man, Block turned the conversation around. He raised his phone to film the encounter and said, "I'd like to know who you really are."

For more than a year, the mystery man, who spoke with a French accent, had presented himself in emails as a Paris-based reporter at *The Wall Street Journal* named William Horobin. But Block had already made an approach to the real Horobin, who has an English accent, and learned that he hadn't sent those emails.

Based on the impostor's inquiries, Block had a strong suspicion about why he was there. Beginning in 2015, Block's hedge fund had published a series of highly critical research reports about Groupe Casino, an international retailer based in France. Block believed that Groupe Casino had sent this man on a spying mission to suss out his next moves.

Confronted on camera, the man denied it. He looked around the room and flashed an awkward smile that quickly fell from his face. Then he ran for the door, managing to evade Block's security team.

The man was soon identified as Jean-Charles Brisard, a prominent corporate-security-and-intelligence consultant who had, in fact, regularly performed work for Groupe Casino, according to reporting by the actual *Wall Street Journal*. (The company has disputed Block's reports and denied any role in the episode at the Pierre. Brisard did not respond to a request for comment.)

Carson Block lives for showdowns like this. He's a short seller: a stock-market investor who looks for troubled companies and places bets against their share price. While most investors root for every uptick in the market, a short seller cuts the other way, making his profits when everyone else is failing. And in Block's case, he can single-handedly tilt the odds in his favor. He is what's known as an activist short seller, a newer and more aggressive

variant. After activist shorts conclude that a company is headed for peril, they don't quietly wait for the share price to fall. They try to make it happen.

About five times a year, Block unveils his latest campaign. In tweets and TV appearances, he announces that his hedge fund, Muddy Waters Capital, has taken a short position in a particular stock, and he simultaneously publishes a research report about the company online, often alleging deception or outright fraud. He stands to profit if the share price plunges in response—and it frequently does.

Activist shorts see themselves as fraud busters. Their reports are like oppo-research dossiers, informed by document dives, intelligence from outside sources, and, often, firsthand detective work. A man hired by Muddy Waters once smuggled a watch outfitted with a secret camera into a high-security facility by hiding it in a body cavity. Back when he did his own fieldwork, Block lined up a meeting in Singapore under an assumed name and hired a makeup artist to disguise him as an older man. (The ruse was totally unconvincing, he admitted: With fake wrinkles and a cotton-ball mustache that flapped around when he breathed, he felt like "fucking Colonel Sanders" and found himself speaking with a southern accent.)



Activist short sellers like Carson Block see themselves as fraud busters. (Brandon Thibodeaux for *The Atlantic*)

Regardless of their methods, short sellers are regularly condemned by everyone from ordinary investors to members of Congress to Elon Musk. The practice is widely seen as a predatory attempt to profit from the stumbles of companies that employ hardworking people and support the economy. The typical response from the activist-short world is, in essence, a raised middle finger. On Twitter, they relish in trolling their enemies. A company deemed to be worthless is a "shitco," a "zero," a "bagel." They're constantly sniping at Musk, whose company Tesla they've long considered outrageously overpriced.

I recently met with Block at the Muddy Waters offices, in Austin, Texas. At 46, he has the air of a bright fraternity guy who reluctantly behaves himself around grown-ups only when necessary. He has a linebacker's physique, with massive upper arms. At the office, he looked most at home in a law-school sweatshirt, throwing around profanities and chewing on Life Savers. He drank an afternoon beer, joked about circumcision, and used the jerk-off gesture while recording an episode of his streaming show, *Zer0 Fucks Given*.

But despite the outsider posture, Block and a handful of similar activists have gained real influence. After years as an independent operator, Block was able to open his hedge fund in 2015 because representatives of an Ivy League university's endowment approached him at a conference and soon offered a $100 million initial investment. He appears regularly on CNBC to opine on the markets. The Securities and Exchange Commission and the Department of Justice have cracked down on misconduct that Block and his competitors have exposed. Robert Jackson, a former SEC commissioner, said onstage at a conference last summer, "Carson Block has uncovered more fraud and saved investors more money than me or anyone else who's had the job I had as an SEC commissioner." In March 2022, after a Muddy Waters report sparked a successful case, the SEC granted Block a $14 million whistleblower award.

Block learned that he was a focal point of a sprawling criminal investigation.

This latest accolade came with a dose of incredible irony, however: The SEC is investigating Block himself, and so is the Department of Justice. On a Friday morning in October 2021, Block was putting his young son in the car when three strangers approached wearing blue windbreakers with yellow lettering on the back—FBI. They showed him a search warrant authorizing them to seize two phones and a computer. This was how Block learned that he was a focal point of a sprawling criminal investigation. The DOJ is probing a number of prominent short sellers, with special scrutiny on the activist crowd. The investigation, which is still unfolding, has given an electric charge to a long-running dispute: Are activist short sellers the heroes of Wall Street, or the villains?

There was a time when short sellers generally preferred to stay behind the curtain. If they wanted to move the market with a hard-hitting story, they went through the press. Investors would quietly approach reporters with suspicions of corporate deceit or even bring them a stuffed research file, on condition of anonymity: *If you call this scientist, he'll tell you why this drugmaker's claims about its product don't make sense.* In 2000, the investor James Chanos famously detected an odor at a Wall Street darling called Enron, shorted the stock, and spoke with Bethany McLean at *Fortune*. She ran with the story and eventually co-wrote a best seller about the energy giant's epic downfall.

Today's activist short sellers want to write the exposé themselves. For them, the press is too stingy for deep investigations, too scared of litigation, too slow. Andrew Left, one of the field's pioneers, told me, "I'm not going to wait for *The Wall Street* fucking *Journal*."

The activist shorts trace their origins to the wilds of the early consumer internet, amid the first dot-com boom. On the message boards of Silicon Investor, RagingBull.com, and Yahoo, a few contrarians would set out to deflate overhyped start-ups, usually under pseudonyms. The funnier and more brazen voices gained a following, and Left was inspired to join in.

Left had once been sanctioned for defrauding customers during a youthful stint in a boiler room, where he cold-called easy prey to sell them on scammy investments. Later, he started shorting the types of dubious stocks he used to tout over the phone. On his rudimentary website,

StockLemon.com, he wrote takedowns in the emerging lingua franca of the internet, riffing on pop culture and quoting rap lyrics. He initially went after penny stocks that were being heavily promoted online, and a growing list of his targets ended up facing regulatory penalties. After a while, he started hunting bigger game and gave StockLemon the more dignified name Citron Research. In 2015, he helped unravel a scandal at Valeant Pharmaceuticals that tanked the share price and led to prison time for two executives connected to the company. Left embraced the role of a guy of modest origins crashing the gates of blue-blood Wall Street. In one report about a company called Medbox, he wrote, “You have to be smoking crack to buy this marijuana stock.” He issued a dare to the founder and CEO: “Your first reaction will be to want to sue me. I hope you do!”

Carson Block entered the picture almost accidentally. He grew up in New Jersey, the son of an alcoholic parent (he won’t say which one). As a student he talked back to teachers, blew off tests, and set the school record for time served in detention. His father was an analyst on Wall Street who promoted stocks he liked, and Block did enough work for him to grow suspicious of the whole scene: CEOs, bankers who took companies public, PR people—he thought they seemed like a bunch of liars. He went to the University of Southern California and law school; did stints as a banker and a lawyer; and lived for years in China, where he opened a self-storage business that failed.

In January 2010, he was an angry 33-year-old expat with debt when he visited a remote factory in a snow-covered area of Hebei province. He was there on behalf of his father, to conduct some due diligence on a publicly traded paper manufacturer called Orient Paper.

Block and a friend who accompanied him found a business that bore no apparent resemblance to the thriving operation that Orient Paper purported to be. The country road leading to the factory couldn’t support the truck traffic the plant ought to have been producing, they thought. According to Block, the building was filled with steam and dripping water, posing obvious hazards for paper products. A stock of raw material allegedly worth millions was a heap of scrap cardboard sitting outside in the snow. After seeing even more red flags in Chinese public records, Block used a credit-card advance to place a $2,000 short bet and sent out a brutal analysis under a new banner, Muddy Waters, in an email to a few dozen Wall Street contacts he barely

knew. “We are confident,” the report said, that Orient Paper “is a fraud.” It was forwarded all over Wall Street and got a mention on CNBC. Although the company denied the allegations, the stock fell by as much as 24 percent within two weeks, and it has never recovered. Block completely bungled his trading in the aftermath of the report and ultimately lost money, he told me, but he had found a career.

From the September 2015 issue: How Wall Street’s bankers stayed out of jail

People started contacting Block with their suspicions about other companies operating in China, and he and a small group of collaborators dug in. They soon took on a much bigger target: Sino-Forest, a timber producer. The outfit had a prominent backer, John Paulson, who had recently made a fortune by effectively shorting the housing market ahead of the global financial crisis. The Muddy Waters report, packed with photos and on-the-ground analysis, stated that Sino-Forest was a “near total fraud,” claiming to buy and sell vast tracts of timber that simply didn’t exist. The $4 billion company collapsed into bankruptcy within a year, and a Canadian regulator validated many of Block’s findings. Paulson took an enormous loss, and this time Block won big—a “life-changing” trade, he said.

The Muddy Waters headquarters is a loftlike space a few blocks from the Texas capitol and governor’s mansion, with exposed beams and brick and a wall decorated with mementos ridiculing Block’s enemies. In an office bathroom, a poster bearing the letterhead of the consulting giant McKinsey & Company gives instructions on masturbation. To Block, McKinsey helps companies get away with things they shouldn’t be doing, just like the elite law firms he’s often pitted against.

In a conference room, one of Block’s analysts walked me through a draft report that Muddy Waters was preparing, on the condition that I not reveal the target. Block is obsessive, even paranoid, about preventing leaks, which can jeopardize his ability to profit from a big reveal. The document used a code name for the company—a fake ticker symbol—in case of prying eyes. It had been heavily annotated by at least four people.

Block describes what he does as “investigative journalism married to a different business model” and is trying to rebrand activist shorts as

“journalist investors.” During my visit, he joined, via remote video, a Delaware court hearing, in which Muddy Waters’ counsel contended that the fund should be protected from a subpoena by the state’s shield law for journalists.

The argument is a stretch. Aside from the fact that attempting to profit from an article would make objectivity impossible for a reporter, much of what activist shorts do would have no place in a newsroom. Their reports are more like prosecutorial briefs than news stories, with little to no airing of opposing views. Any reputable reporter will approach a company before publishing damning allegations, to offer a chance to respond or correct errors. Activist shorts don’t generally do this, because the target could mess up the trade. Block and his competitors have also used muckraking tactics that would be forbidden at most news organizations: undercover work, paid sources, covert recordings. They’ll spy on factories and trick security guards into revealing precious information. Block maintains that if you want the ugly truth, you can’t go in through the front door.

Short activism’s borderline methods became a focus of last fall’s criminal trial of Trevor Milton, the former CEO of the electric-vehicle maker Nikola Corporation, who was convicted of fraud and has since moved for a new trial. In a 2020 report, Nate Anderson, of Hindenburg Research, accused Milton of a series of lies and revealed a delicious detail: In a promotional video that showed a prototype of Nikola’s hydrogen-fuel-cell truck cruising across a desert landscape, the truck was not in fact traveling on its own, because it didn’t work. It had been towed up a hill, and the only thing powering it was gravity.

Jurors watched the video over the protestations of defense attorneys, who later emphasized that Anderson had rewarded his source, a former Nikola contractor. A paid source has an incentive to exaggerate, and Anderson had cut his in on the short bet, resulting in a $600,000 payout. Anderson said it was appropriate to compensate the whistleblower for his efforts and risk, and that all allegations had been vetted by Hindenburg.

In early 2022, Anderson got particularly creative on another project. His team was investigating a suspected Ponzi scheme involving an investing firm called J and J Purchasing. To get a meeting with J and J’s principals,

they enlisted a man with experience in improv comedy to pose as a prospective client. A meeting occurred at a private airport in Nevada, aboard a jet that Hindenburg had chartered for the occasion to lend the impression of fabulous wealth. The plane was outfitted with hidden cameras and microphones.

Anderson told me that when a friend first proposed using a jet as a baited trap, "I thought it was a pretty insane idea. And it took me about five seconds to really love it." There was no way to short J and J, because it wasn't publicly traded, but Anderson's company filed a whistleblower claim with the SEC, putting it in a position to be paid should the agency recover significant funds in a case.

The FBI had the secret recordings from the jet when its agents paid a visit in March 2022 to a lawyer who helped run the scheme, looking to execute a search warrant at his Las Vegas home. Then the tale of a vigilante caper gave way to something more grave. The attorney, Matthew Beasley, came to the door holding a gun to his head. He swung the weapon toward the agents, a prosecutor later said, and was shot in the chest and shoulder before retreating into the house. During an hours-long armed standoff, Beasley spoke of suicide and confessed to an FBI negotiator that he had scammed investors out of some $300 million. He was finally taken into custody. The SEC has brought charges against 15 people allegedly connected to the operation, and court filings indicate that Beasley is negotiating a possible plea deal. Anderson has submitted Hindenburg's report for consideration for the Pulitzer Prize in investigative journalism.

At a conference called Fraud Fest this past summer in Manhattan, Andrew Left, 52 and well tanned, took the stage wearing white-leather shoes with tassels and a crisp pink shirt. The annual event attracts academics, lawyers, and journalists with an interest in corporate misconduct, but short sellers are a big draw, because they can be counted on to throw a few grenades. During Left's appearance, he lobbed one at Sam Bankman-Fried, the founder of the cryptocurrency exchange FTX. This was months before Bankman-Fried's meltdown, but Left ridiculed him as a shifty guy posturing as the "Federal Reserve of crypto" in the Bahamas. "I think crypto—it's just a *complete* fraud," Left said.

The usual suspects were in attendance. Nate Anderson was there, along with some of the older generation of big leaguers who don't publish their research, such as Jim Carruthers and Jim Chanos, of Enron fame. Block was set to join the proceedings remotely for the conference finale.

The shorts are a small circle who refer to one another by first name. There are a few bitter rivalries, but the group is united by a deep conviction that just about everyone else is corrupt or clueless. Within this crew, Chanos is something like the elder statesman—he has gray hair and teaches a class at Yale—but even he tweets "LOL" and "AYFKM" from a pseudonymous account that everyone knows is his.

Soren Aandahl, of Blue Orca Capital, compared the short world to the bizarro cantina in *Star Wars*—a "motley collection of ridiculous characters" who exist "on the outer rim, at the edge of the empire." This club has fewer Ivy League types than the rest of Wall Street, and more guys with tattoos. To be a short is to swim against the current of history, especially since the global financial crisis, the era of short activism's ascendancy. Despite the bear market of the past year, if you zoom out on the timeline of the financial markets, the charts go up and to the right—the bulls win.

Elon Musk has argued that short selling should be illegal and called its practitioners "jerks who want us to die."

Membership also involves maniacal levels of risk. If you "go long" by buying stock, like most investors, the worst you can do is lose the money you put down in the first place. To short a stock, you borrow shares and then immediately sell them. The hope is that later you can buy the shares for cheaper, return them to the lender, and pocket the difference. But at some point, you need to make your move and "cover"—buy back those shares you owe. And because there is no limit to how high the price can go, there's no limit to how much you can lose. If you shorted Enron too early, you faced serious paper losses as the share price soared. Unless you had steely conviction and a large balance sheet, you likely gave up before the plunge proved you right. After the mega-investor Bill Ackman made a big bet against Herbalife and waged a public battle that didn't pay off, he declared that activist short selling was "not worth the brain damage."

At the Fraud Fest conference, there was a lot of talk, as usual, about Elon Musk, who was then in the midst of his doomed attempt to back out of buying Twitter. In private huddles and onstage, the shorts were grinning at the prospect that he'd be forced to close a raw deal. If the shorts have an Enemy No. 1, it's Musk.

About a decade ago, short sellers began zeroing in on Tesla. They saw the company as just another fanciful tech "story," propped up by credulous investors and fanboys. The idea that a start-up would beat established automakers by selling millions of electric cars was a pipe dream. Plus, Tesla was burning through cash. In 2017, Chanos said he thought the stock was "worthless." Most prominent short sellers have bet against the company at some point. Musk has responded with characteristic attitude over the years, arguing that short selling should be illegal and calling its practitioners "jerks who want us to die."

The feud heated up in 2018, when Musk teased that the "short burn of the century" was coming. Weeks later, he tweeted that there was "funding secured" to take Tesla private. The share price predictably rose; the buyout never happened. Left lost money and sued over the tweet, alleging that Musk had violated securities law by making a false statement. "I think Elon is a criminal," Block told me. Musk reached a settlement with the SEC, or, as he called it, the "Shortseller Enrichment Commission."

Read: Elon Musk mocks SEC on Twitter days after settlement

Despite Block's antipathy for Musk, over the years he has concluded that the mogul plays "the public-company game" better than anyone. Musk understands the power of rallying your fans and investors against an enemy in a fight that feels righteous. What better enemy than short-selling hedge funds? In recent months, Tesla has finally had the precipitous fall that the shorts had long predicted. Unfortunately for them, most had already closed their positions in despair. In 2020 and 2021, with considerable help from everyday traders who idolize Musk, Tesla's stock skyrocketed, costing the shorts oceans of money. A delighted Musk announced a new product: Tesla-branded red-satin "short shorts." A rush of fans crashed the website.

Those years, during the worst of the coronavirus pandemic, were rough for short sellers. The government pumped trillions into the economy to prop it up, sending markets to the sky. Companies that shorts believed were "bagels" got a ride on the froth. Block thought it was obscene: Bogus crypto schemes were running rampant, COVID was killing people by the tens of thousands, "and the markets were ripping!" A custom sweatshirt hangs on the wall at Muddy Waters. It reads 2020: Does Anything Matter Anymore?

And then came GameStop. On Reddit boards and other social media, day traders argued that Wall Street pros were undervaluing unglamorous stocks such as GameStop, a brick-and-mortar retailer of video games. Other users gleefully pointed out that these stocks were heavily shorted, which presented an opportunity: If enough people banded together to bid up the price, they could induce the #MOASS, the mother of all short squeezes. In a short squeeze, a spiking price causes panicking short sellers to close their position by buying the shares they owe—which only drives the price higher still.

Forming a stampede, the Reddit crowd sent GameStop and other widely shorted stocks to unimaginable heights. They called themselves "degenerates," casting themselves as the riffraff of the market. Left tried to push back, telling GameStop buyers they were "the suckers at this poker game." The mob ran him over. Left took an eight-figure loss on his trade. He and his family were inundated with hacking attempts, threatening texts, and prank pizza deliveries in the middle of the night, he said. Musk, already an idol to many degenerates, tweeted a link to the Reddit board and invoked the in-crowd lingo: "Gamestonk!!"

Derek Thompson: The whole messy, ridiculous GameStop saga in one sentence

The Redditors painted the shorts as enemies of the people, and it worked. "Private funds engaged in predatory short selling to the detriment of other investors must be stopped," Representative Maxine Waters of California said, announcing an investigation following the GameStop episode. For the shorts, it was absurd. They had just been left for dead in a coordinated short squeeze—and they were the bad guys? Left had always thought of himself as David to the Wall Street establishment's Goliath. Now he was Goliath.

Days after taking a beating on GameStop, on January 29, 2021, Left announced his indefinite retirement from activist short selling in a video posted online. An incredible coincidence followed, although it didn't become public at the time. Minutes after he recorded the video, federal agents executed a search warrant at Left's house in Beverly Hills, seizing electronic devices. According to Block, Left called him, sounding shaken. Left told him that a whole crowd of agents was at his house and that the government wanted all his communications with dozens of short sellers about certain stocks. The list included Muddy Waters. Nine months later, the FBI showed up in Block's driveway.

Both Block and Left told me that they are guilty of nothing, and expressed frustration that they don't understand exactly what crime they are suspected of committing. "I don't even know what I'm innocent about!" Left said. The DOJ probe began several years before the two men learned of its existence. They both said they have turned over tens of thousands of pages of records to the government.

Not everyone would talk with a journalist while being investigated by the Department of Justice. Although Block and Left may never be charged, they are living under the threat that they could be arrested at any time. Two of Block's co-workers were also served with warrants, as was at least one other activist short, an associate of Block's. (Nate Anderson hasn't received a subpoena or a warrant and is not a current focus of the investigation.)

Despite Block's perilous situation, during many hours of interviews he rarely declined to answer a question. With his methods and trading under legal scrutiny, he described them in detail. He called it "unforgivable" that federal agents served him in front of his young son, and said he suspects that his fate is in the hands of "horrific people" in government. Faced with broad subpoenas naming numerous prominent funds, he and Left have interpreted the investigation, correctly or not, as an attack on the entire practice of short activism, and Block has taken the lead in fighting back. (He complained to me that his fellow short sellers weren't being more vocal in their own defense.)

For decades, public companies contending with short reports have countered by accusing them of making false or misleading statements, which can

constitute securities fraud or defamation. Block and Left have each been sued over their published claims numerous times. But in cases of that kind, First Amendment protections typically prevail. The current DOJ investigation, which carries much higher stakes than a civil suit, has taken a different approach. According to sources familiar with the matter, the investigation is probing possible coordination surrounding the publication of short reports, looking for signs of market manipulation or other trading abuses. The focus is on trading activity, not the content of the reports. In this respect at least, prosecutors have taken a page from an unusual source: the research of a 37-year-old professor at Columbia Law School named Joshua Mitts.

Mitts looks young enough to be in college. He has a studious air, a nasal voice, and a doctorate in finance and economics. His work expresses a range of views, including in support of short selling. But he is best known as the author of a paper called "Short and Distort." He posted it as a preprint in June 2018 and soon became a public voice on the issue. Drawing on trading data, he had reached the conclusion that when short reports were followed by a steep plunge, often the cause wasn't revelations of purported fraud or mismanagement. Instead, he argued, the drop was more typically prompted by some suspiciously well-timed trades that "mechanically crash" the share price. Mitts noted that traders who appeared to know about a report ahead of time made highly leveraged short bets that were, in a sense, spring-loaded—they triggered automated trading by others that could accelerate a downward move. During the short-term plunge, by his interpretation, the price didn't reflect true supply and demand. Instead, it was the result of a handful of people gaming the system.



This theory was exactly what targeted companies wanted to hear. They invariably faced shareholder suits accusing them of covering up misconduct alleged in short reports. Mitts's research would allow them to argue in court that the shareholders' losses were somebody else's fault.

Mitts started doing some consulting. He made his first approach to Farmland Partners, a small Colorado firm that invests in agricultural land. It was reeling from a short report that had prompted a 39 percent sell-off, and hired Mitts to help with a lawsuit against the pseudonymous author. Within

months, Mitts was advising several companies that had met with the SEC about short activism. He wrote in a column, “Public companies are under attack from manipulative short sellers.”

Block jousted with Mitts on Twitter, proposing a debate. He believed Mitts was swinging wildly with his allegations and hadn’t proved that short sellers were manipulating the market. He visited one of Mitts’s classes at Columbia and sat down with him to discuss his methods. Then Mitts became a consultant to a company that was seeking to discredit Block after he had shorted it. Block saw this as a betrayal. Within a year, Mitts also began advising the Department of Justice. The activist short sued by Farmland, Quinton Mathews, later came under government scrutiny as well and was questioned multiple times by DOJ officials. Investigators broadened their probe into the wider network of short sellers, including Block and Left. The Justice Department engaged Mitts as an expert in that effort.

To Block and other activist shorts, the picture suggests a suspicious coziness between the government and corporate America. In their interpretation, companies weren’t having much luck getting regulators to go after short sellers who’d made them look bad. Then along came an Ivy League academic to provide the credentials and intellectual underpinning for an escalating series of legal offensives. On Twitter, Block called Mitts “the tip of the spear in the War Against Shorts.” He argues that shady companies used Mitts’s faulty ideas to advance their agenda—and Mitts managed to gain the trust of the Justice Department. (The DOJ declined to comment.)

The mere fact that Block has made a short bet can be enough to pummel a stock.

At Fraud Fest, in a recorded interview aired from the stage, Mitts rebutted criticisms that Block had laid out in detail. Block appeared on-screen immediately afterward. He likened Mitts’s comments to “a typical management response to being busted,” prompting laughter from the seats where the short sellers had congregated. Mitts’s scholarship, Block said, was “a pile of shit from top to bottom.” (Block has also accused the professor of academic fraud, and wrote a letter of complaint to Columbia’s human-resources department. The university took no action against Mitts; he was granted tenure during Block’s offensive.)

Mitts told me that his aims and motives have been badly mischaracterized. If he has been helpful to government officials, he said, "I am very proud of that fact." But he disputed the idea that he's the tip of any spear: "The notion that a law professor is directing a federal investigation is as ridiculous as it sounds." He also questioned the notion that an academic paper would lead a judge to find probable cause to authorize a search warrant. Indeed, the prominent former federal prosecutor Eric Rosen describes a search warrant as a message from the government that says, "We have strong evidence to believe that both a crime occurred and that you were a part of it." What exactly made the Justice Department arrive at that belief about Block and Left is not yet clear.

By now, Block has accumulated the kind of power that seems easy to exploit. When he attended the Hong Kong edition of the Sohn Conference in 2017, he was constantly shadowed by a crowd of reporters as the market feverishly tried to guess what new short he would announce onstage. A lot of people guessed wrong; stocks that weren't even on his radar fell sharply. They bounced back once he revealed his actual target: a furniture maker in Hong Kong, whose stock immediately plunged. In 2020, when Block announced a short position in the company eHealth during a CNBC interview, the network showed a real-time graph of the share price next to his face on-screen. The stock fell by 15 percent inside of a minute.

From the February 1930 issue: Selling short: The morals and economics of margins

The mere fact that Block has made a short bet can be enough to pummel a stock, allowing him to profit regardless of the merits of his claims. It is widely believed that traders have developed algorithms to scrape his Twitter feed and website for new mentions of stock tickers in order to beat the rush for the exits. Because the market is now largely an arena in which computers trade with other computers, the downward move can be exacerbated by high-frequency and other algorithmic traders. When the price crosses thresholds that trigger shareholders' "stop-loss orders," selling begets even more selling. Was Block right? It barely matters.

Celebrating a short seller's campaign is easy when it proves to be on the side of justice. The world benefited when Block revealed that Sino-Forest was

riddled with fraud. But many short reports produce a messier outcome—an initial dive in the stock price followed by months of arguments over the author's allegations, in the markets and sometimes in court. By the time the truth is sorted out, the activist short is long gone: He probably cashed out his winning bet on day one, during the collapse he catalyzed. Block himself doesn't deny that he starts closing his position right after a report is published, as a means of managing his risk.

In that scenario, short activism can look more like a get-rich-quick scheme. Take the Farmland case. Mathews, the short seller, ultimately admitted in a settlement that he had made serious misstatements in his report, yet he and other shorts still profited on the initial drop. If you cover your trade immediately, Farmland CEO Paul Pittman told me, "you're not selling into the fact that you have discovered something negative about a public company. You're selling into the panic that you created yourself."

The Farmland episode drew attention to another unadvertised practice: Often the author of a short report is only one participant in a coordinated campaign, and the biggest player is usually invisible. Mathews had targeted Farmland only after a hedge fund that was paying him a monthly fee, Sabrepoint Capital Management, alerted him to the stock. To Pittman, Mathews was a "dupe" and Sabrepoint was the true mastermind. (Sabrepoint insists that it didn't pay Mathews to publish a report, only to do research, and denies any wrongdoing.)

Partnerships like this are an open secret in the business, and typically they're even more direct. An activist short who doesn't have the capital to fully exploit his idea will often link up with a "balance-sheet provider"—a larger hedge fund that puts on a big trade and gives the author a piece of the proceeds. Block had a silent backer early in his career (and once sold a report to several funds ahead of time). Now, in addition to publishing its own reports, Muddy Waters is the undisclosed balance-sheet provider behind other activist shorts.

It is unclear whether any of this conduct can be construed as illegal, absent a false statement. But the government could possibly bring a case alleging that activist shorts are guilty of, in essence, a reverse pump and dump. If you tout an investment when your own intention is to sell, you can be charged with a

crime—you've broadcast a fraudulent opinion in an attempt to manipulate the price. Now invert the scenario. Imagine there's a stock at $10 and an activist short publicly claims that it's worth $2 at best. If he starts covering by buying back shares at $7, the theory goes, hasn't he lied to the market? If you truly believe that the stock is worth $2, why aren't you waiting for it to fall that far?

If you think short activism is a get-rich-quick scheme, the shorts say, *you* try it.

Block shakes his head ruefully at that kind of thinking—if only the world made that much sense. Like many shorts, he has long seen himself as a force of reason, someone who grabs the market by the lapels and says, *This company is selling you a fairy tale. Snap out of it.* His fierce demeanor grows out of an idealistic belief that if he can show that a company is doing something wrong, the market ought to respond.

But as the markets have become divorced from economic reality, Block's idealism has curdled into a kind of nihilism. Sure, he thinks, it would be terrific if a shitco worth $2 a share actually went to $2. But what if a bunch of Reddit degenerates decide to shoot it to the moon because *LOL, nothing matters*? When you're operating in an anarchic multiplayer video game, his logic goes, you need to protect yourself somehow.

To the shorts, Mitts and perhaps the DOJ live in a dreamworld where short sellers have somehow figured out how to control the video game. If you think short activism is a get-rich-quick scheme, they say, *you* try it. You'll learn it's a get-poor-quick scheme too. Last summer, Block lost more money than he ever has in a single trade, he said, due to an epic case of bad timing. He had shorted a solar company, Sunrun, and was preparing to publish his report the next day, when Senator Joe Manchin unexpectedly announced a deal on legislation that would boost the whole solar industry. Sunrun's stock shot up, too late for Block to back out, and Muddy Waters lost eight figures. "We got Manchined," he said.

In Block's worldview, all you can do is accept the chaos and keep looking for an edge, no matter what kind of ridiculous situations you find yourself in. He recounted to me what happened when, in early 2020, Muddy Waters

published a deep dive into Luckin Coffee, a company with hundreds of locations in China that was making a run at Starbucks. The analysis drew on more than 11,000 hours of video surveillance and more than 25,000 customer receipts to conclude that some of the sales numbers had to be faked. (Luckin later acknowledged this to be true.)

Block's team members hadn't done the research or writing, but after spot-checking the report, they decided it was credible and tweeted it out. The stock began to tumble. Then, hours later, Andrew Left tweeted that despite his "respect for Muddy," he took the opposite view: On Luckin, he was a buyer. Boom, the shares rebounded. The truth about Luckin Coffee wouldn't be known for some time, but for now, the stock had become the plaything of two men. Fortunes would be won and lost based on tweets. It was a farce, but what can you do? Block smiled broadly, like a child, and laughed: "Fuckin' Andrew."

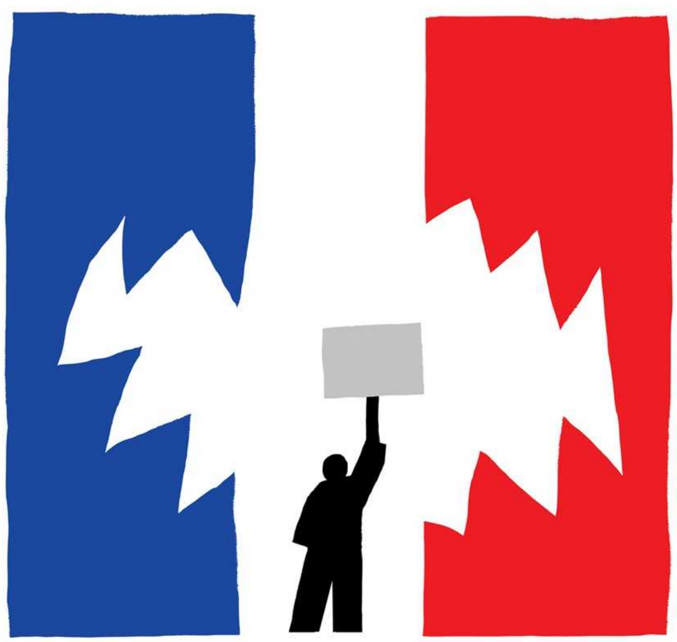
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The French Are in a Panic Over le Wokisme

The nation’s vehement rejection of identity politics made me recalibrate my own views about woke ideology.

by Thomas Chatterton Williams



It took me a moment to register the sound of scattered hissing at the Tocqueville Conversations—a two-day “taboo-free discussion” among public intellectuals about the crisis of Western democracies. More than 100

of us had gathered in a large tent set up beneath the window of Alexis de Tocqueville's study, on the grounds of the 16th-century Château de Tocqueville, in coastal Normandy. I couldn't remember hearing an audience react like this in such a forum.

The democratic crisis that the conference sought to address has many facets: the rise of the authoritarian right, metastasizing economic inequality, the pressures of climate change, and more. But the conference, held in September 2021, had mostly narrowed its focus to the American social-justice ideology that's commonly referred to as "wokeness." The person being hissed at that afternoon was Rokhaya Diallo, a French West African journalist, social-justice activist, and media personality in her mid-40s. (In America, she writes for *The Washington Post*.) Besides me, she was one of just a handful of nonwhite speakers and, to my knowledge, the sole practicing Muslim.

For many of us who had come to exchange ideas, the venue felt significant. The château, with its ivy-covered walls and swan-filled pond, lies far away from the intricacies of multicultural life in modern democracies. But Tocqueville was, of course, one of the world's keenest interpreters of the American experiment. His classic two-volume text, *Democracy in America*, published in 1835 and 1840, explored the paradoxical nature of a vibrant new multiethnic society, founded on the principles of liberty and equality but compromised from the start by African slave labor and the theft of Indigenous land. Its author, while finding much to admire, remained skeptical that such powerful divisions could ever be transcended, because unlike in Europe, social rank was written into the physical features of the nation's inhabitants.

Many who claim social justice as their ultimate goal insist that America has done little to challenge Tocqueville's grim appraisal. In their view, some of the country's cherished ideals—individualism, freedom of speech, even the Protestant work ethic—are in fact obstacles to equity, illusions spun by those who have power in order to keep it and hold the marginalized in their place. The woke left's approach to addressing historical oppression—namely, prioritizing race and other categories of identity in a wide variety of political and institutional decisions—has stirred anxieties in the United States. But the concerns expressed at the Tocqueville estate were less about what this

phenomenon means for America than what it might mean for France. As the saying goes, when America sneezes, Europe catches a cold.

The French have long prided themselves on having a system of government that doesn't recognize racial or ethnic designations. The idea is to uphold a universal vision of what it means to be French, independent of race, ethnicity, and religion. Even keeping official statistics on race has, since the Holocaust, been impermissible. Recently, however, and to the alarm of many in the traditional French commentariat, American-style identity politics has piqued the interest of a new and more diverse generation.

And so I'd come to witness an extraordinary exchange—one that would not happen in the U.S. mainstream. Over the course of the conference, speakers had repeatedly debated whether what the French have termed *le wokisme* is a serious concern. A majority of the panelists and audience members, myself included, had answered more or less in the affirmative. Political organization around identity rather than ideology is one of the best predictors of civil strife and even civil war, according to an analysis of violent conflicts by the political scientist Barbara F. Walter. By pitting groups against one another in a zero-sum power struggle—and sorting them on a scale of virtue based on privilege and oppression—wokeness can't help but elevate race and ethnicity to an extent that expands prejudice rather than reducing it, in the process fueling or, at minimum, providing cover for a violent and dangerous majoritarian reaction. That, at least, was the prevailing sense of the group.

As the last panel, "Media and Universities: In Need of Reform and Reassessment?," got under way, Diallo took the opportunity to argue the opposite position. Onstage with her were a political scientist and two philosophy professors, one of whom was the moderator, Perrine Simon-Nahum. Diallo is a well-known and polarizing figure in France, a telegenic proponent of identity politics with a large social-media following. She draws parallels between the French and American criminal-justice systems (one of her documentaries is called *From Paris to Ferguson*), making the case that institutional racism afflicts her nation just as it does the U.S., most notably in discriminatory stop-and-frisk policing. Her views would hardly be considered extreme in America, but here she is seen in some quarters as a genuinely subversive agent.

Simon-Nahum opened the conversation with the question "How can we shape citizens in a democracy?" And what role should educational institutions and the media play? Were woke forces in universities and media striving to delegitimize elites, she continued, and to undermine the institutions of knowledge production? Were they "building a new totalitarianism of thought?" The woke ideal of disseminating knowledge "on an egalitarian platform," she suggested, was neither possible nor even desirable.

"The circulation of knowledge is also the circulation of experiences," Diallo responded. "Some minority experiences may be more visible" now thanks to social media. That poses a much-needed challenge to traditional "elite" knowledge production, which, she said, had "filtered out" certain perspectives in the past. This claim was indisputable. A few weeks after this conference, Emmanuel Macron would become the first French president to participate in commemorations of the 1961 massacre of Algerian protesters by police in Paris. Most French people I know had never encountered this event either in school or in traditional media.

Read: A Macron victory isn't enough

The woke "have discovered new epistemologies," Jean-François Braunstein, a philosophy professor at Panthéon-Sorbonne University, nonetheless retorted—theories of knowledge that validate feelings over facts. He called Diallo's position "a staunch attack against science and against truth." He appeared to want to expand the conversation's scope beyond racial identity to encompass the dissolution of the gender binary, which was not a subject Diallo had been addressing. Simon-Nahum demurred but suggested that the larger disagreement about "the conception of knowledge" was still worrying; it justified fears that the French discourse was becoming Americanized.

Diallo replied that most people in attendance were likely "privileged," and as such, disproportionately fearful of the "emergence of minority speech [from] people who indeed didn't have access to certain clubs … and are questioning things that were considered" unquestionable.

"Of course we cannot experience what others experience," Simon-Nahum responded, with seeming irritation—no longer moderating but fully entering

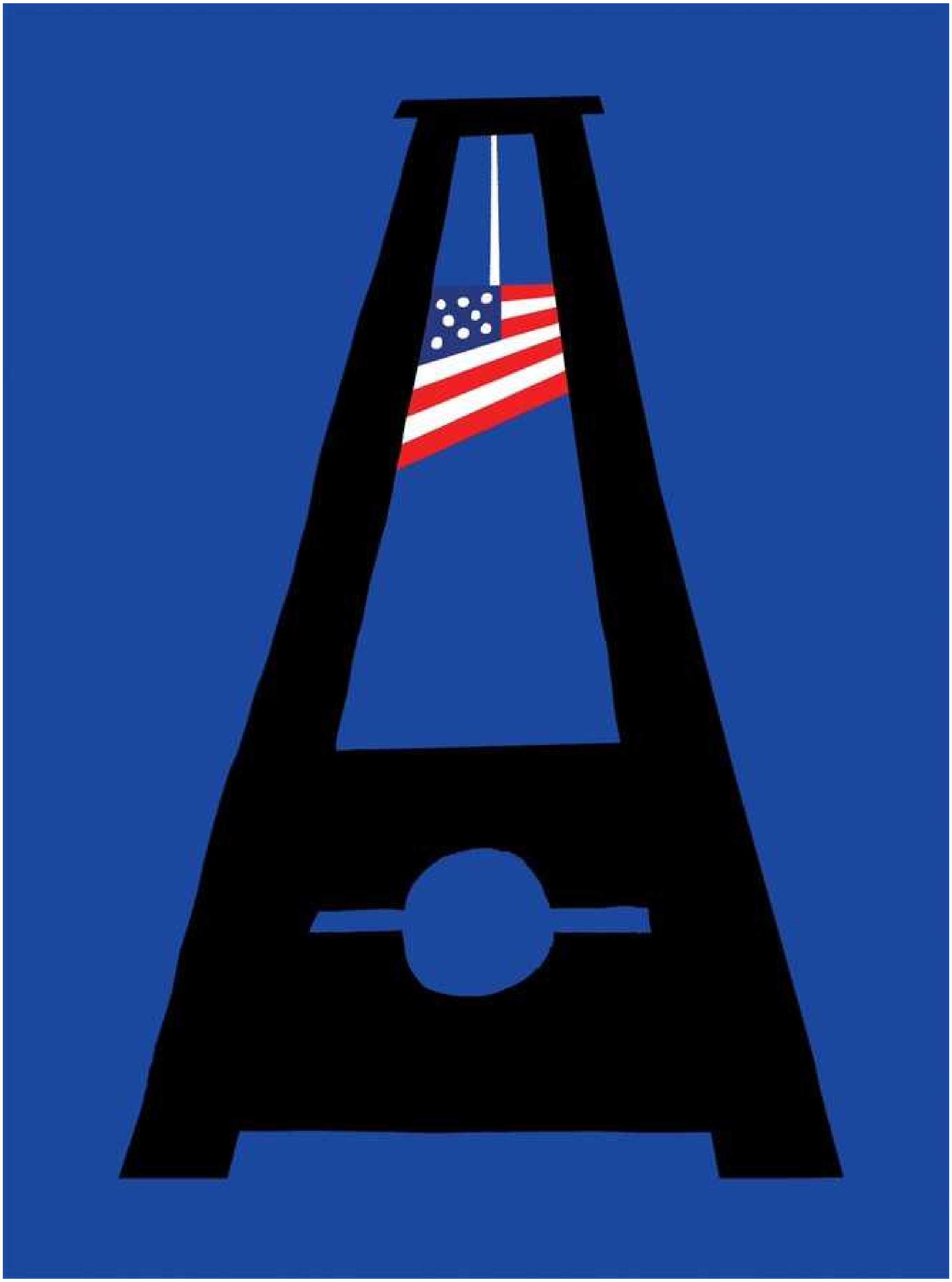
the debate. And yet, we can understand it: “It’s called empathy,” she said, before sharply taking issue with Diallo’s point about privilege.

It was around that time, with Diallo isolated from the rest of the panel, that I started to notice the hissing, coming from the audience when she spoke. As the moderator refused to concede even the theoretical possibility that any knowledge can be derived from identity, I noticed Diallo’s expression growing distant. Simon-Nahum pressed on, referring to Diallo’s appeal to lived experience as not only misguided but a kind of “domination.” “This intellectual war that’s being waged is a threat to democracy,” she said. “I feel threatened … first and foremost [as] a citizen.”

Braunstein chimed in to say that Diallo’s argument reminded him of a quote by the extravagantly racist writer and Nazi collaborator Charles Maurras: “A Jew can never understand [Jean] Racine, because he’s not French!” (When Diallo objected, Braunstein said that he was not comparing her to Maurras.)

It went on like that. By the end of the discussion, I was somewhat shaken. On many discrete points, I tended to agree with the philosophers on the panel. I have made Paris my home for the past 11 years and have been raising French children there for nine of them, which is to say I feel a genuine stake in the culture. I am convinced that it would be a terrible, perhaps even insurmountable, loss to abandon the universalist, color-blind French ideal to the fractured landscape of American tribal identity.

And yet I also felt that something fundamentally unfair had just transpired. France, like America, is constantly evolving. Any attempt to make sense of it will have to take Diallo’s arguments seriously. She had tried to share an understanding of French life—one in which growing segments of the French population feel excluded and censured—that her interlocutors could not or would not accept, but that their behavior seemed to confirm.



I had until that point considered Diallo an ideological opponent. She had likewise regarded me warily—as a privileged, nonwhite, non-French

spokesperson for a universalism that masks white prerogatives. Her personal credo of sorts, "*Kiffe ta race*" ("Love your race"), which is the title of her podcast and her most recent book, directly contradicts my own writing against the reinforcement of racial identity. And yet, when she walked offstage alone, I found myself rushing to catch up with her. As we spoke, to my surprise, my eyes became teary. I wanted her to know that I had seen what she'd experienced, even if no one else had. "That happens all the time here," she told me. "It happens all the time."

The French reaction to *le wokisme* has been revelatory for me. I am working on a book about the ways American culture and institutions changed after the summer of 2020, and how that transformation has, to an unusual degree, reverberated internationally, and particularly in France. The incident at the Tocqueville conference caused me to recalibrate some of my assumptions—and to appreciate more keenly just how easily anti-wokeness can succumb to a dogmatism as rigid as the one it seeks to oppose. Many of the debates here take place as if in a parallel universe, eerily familiar but with several illuminating differences. They are a useful prism for contemplating the excesses and limitations, as well as the merits, of the social-justice fervor that has gripped the United States.

France's vehement reaction to wokeism has to do with the country's complex relationship with America itself.

The French left exerts far less power than American progressives do over the media, academia, culture, and elite corporations. Diversity as an end in itself, and minority representation in particular, is still far from a mainstream preoccupation here. Outside one prestigious school—Sciences Po, in Paris—affirmative action scarcely exists. Perhaps because of comparatively muscular labor laws (which Macron has sought to weaken), people do not fear being canceled for controversial speech, either in universities or in the workplace. The #MeToo movement could not gain much traction in a country whose major left-leaning intellectuals and at least one newspaper published unequivocal defenses of pedophilia as recently as the 1970s. France has little patience for American culture-war staples such as genderless pronouns and bathrooms. Even the relatively modest, gender-neutral *iel* was forcefully dismissed by the first lady, Brigitte Macron: "Our

language is beautiful. And two pronouns is enough," she has said, to practically no pushback at all.

So why has the reaction to American-style identity politics become so heated within the French intellectual sphere?

One reason lies in a crucial distinction between the political realities of France and the United States. In France, the controversy over *le wokisme* is almost always a proxy for a deeper concern about Islam and terror on the European continent. Those seen as permissive of wokeness are presumed to be indulging not merely a victim complex, but something far more sinister: *islamo-gauchisme*, what the far-right former presidential candidate Marine Le Pen has described as the alliance between Islamist fanatics and the French left. My friend Pascal Bruckner, a traditionally liberal philosopher, describes it in his book *The Tyranny of Guilt* as "the fusion between the atheist far Left and religious radicalism." This is understood as a marriage of convenience: The anti-capitalist left sees Islam's potential for fomenting unrest as a tool to discredit the center and radically remake bourgeois society; reactionary Muslim parties, in turn, pretend to join the left in opposing racism and globalization as a means of amassing power.

Thus, in the French racial imagination, it is the potentially violent Muslim—not simply the man with dark skin—who represents the ultimate "other." But even if France didn't experience violence, an identity politics that would give cover to separatism is seen as unacceptable. This is what Simon-Nahum seems to have meant when she said she felt "threatened" as a citizen. And it's why, for some, matters as trivial as halal-food aisles in the supermarket take on an existential quality that has no real equivalent in 21st-century America.

But France's vehement reaction to wokeism has another cause, which is barely discernible in the U.S. It has to do with France's complex relationship with America itself.

On September 13, 2001, beside an image of the Statue of Liberty shrouded in blooming clouds of smoke, the front page of *Le Monde* proudly declared, "*Nous sommes tous Américains*." It was a grand and heartfelt gesture of solidarity in the face of incomprehensible hatred and barbarity, one that was

returned in 2015 when a spasm of terror swept over France. That extraordinary year began with the massacre by al-Qaeda-affiliated militants of 12 people in the Paris offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, which had republished caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad. It concluded with a citywide rampage in November, in which 130 were slain and hundreds more were injured in cafés, restaurants, and the Bataclan concert hall—most of them by homegrown radicals declaring allegiance to the Islamic State. The immediate outpouring of grief in the American press, and the millions of Facebook profile pictures filtered with the tricolor, was as moving as it was justified.

Over the next five years, the U.S. could no longer muster such empathy. By the fall of 2020, America had fully turned its gaze inward. The police killings of George Floyd and others directed America's attention to its own legacy of slavery and racism. These were the conditions in which a new and at times totalizing ideology, organized around a racial binary, gained traction. And practically overnight, the mainstream American press became reluctant to view what had been happening in France (namely, a spree of machete attacks, decapitations, and stabbings, from Paris down to the Riviera) through the lens of individual agency, ideology, religious radicalism, terrorism, or even plain old good and evil. Suddenly, it was all about identity and systems of oppression. Through the lens of racial reckoning, fanatically secular and color-blind France had, in a sense, brought this grief upon itself.

For many in France, a headline in *The New York Times* crystallized this new attitude of reproach. Following the beheading of a middle-school teacher named Samuel Paty in October 2020—for the transgression of showing those *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons in the classroom—the American newspaper of record's first encapsulation of the attack focused not on Paty but on his assailant: "French Police Shoot and Kill Man After a Fatal Knife Attack on the Street." The headline was subsequently changed, and the article itself was relatively balanced. But when it described Paty as having "incited anger among some Muslim families," the implication to many French readers was unambiguous: Teaching the universal value of free speech to all students, regardless of ethnic affiliation, was what had really led to Paty's murder. French audiences took this idea—which was echoed throughout much of the American media—as an exoneration of Paty's assassin, an 18-year-old

Chechen asylum recipient with extremist beliefs who had hunted down his victim only after learning of his existence from a social-media mob.

Reading such coverage in the American press was painful for many French people of all ethnicities and religious affiliations. For months, the perceived abandonment by an admired and influential ally was the subject of constant conversation. Why were American commentators using Paty's killing to score points on Twitter by condemning a society they did not know? Why had the *Times* framed this act of savagery as a simple—and, one might infer, possibly excessive—police shooting? Why were journalists at other outlets, including *The Washington Post*, reinforcing a narrative that reduced complex issues of secularism, republicanism, and immigration to broad allegations of Islamophobia? Why were critics on social media resorting to the blunt racial catchall of whiteness? Did they not understand that French citizens of African or Arab descent were also appalled by such violence?

Many French people began to see their nation as a pivotal theater of resistance to woke orthodoxy. Macron himself became a determined critic, insisting that his country follow its own path to achieve a multiethnic democracy, without mimicking the identity-obsessed American model. "We have left the intellectual debate to … Anglo-Saxon traditions based on a different history, which is not ours," he argued just before Paty's killing, in his October 2020 speech against "Islamist separatism." Macron's minister of national education at the time, Jean-Michel Blanquer, spoke of the need to wage "a battle" against the woke ideas being promulgated by American universities.

Pamela Druckerman: Why the French want to stop working

The unease with *le wokisme* in France, then, is shaped and heightened by the country's distinctive history and self-perception—its legitimate fears of homegrown jihad and its concerns about domineering Yankee influence. You can't understand the French reaction to wokeness without understanding these domestic preoccupations. But at the same time, you can't dismiss France's more philosophical—and universalist—critiques of wokeism simply because of them. The battle against wokeness that Blanquer described has been joined on both sides of the Atlantic. Last spring, I visited him at his offices to get his perspective on it.

Blanquer, the minister of national education from 2017 until May 2022, has been one of France's most consistent, controversial, and powerful opponents of woke ideology. (He once filed a suit—later dismissed—against a French teachers' union for using the term *institutional racism* in a description of its workshops.) In January 2022, he spoke at—and, by his presence, lent the state's imprimatur to—a colloquium at the Sorbonne titled "After Deconstruction," which brought together an array of critics of the new social-justice orthodoxy.

Blanquer is matter-of-fact and unsparing. While studying at Harvard in the '90s, he told me, he first became aware of PC culture, the precursor to what he sees as today's crisis. He sympathized with many of the aims of political correctness but grew wary of its application: Treating women and minority groups as different and special, he began to think, was ultimately antithetical to equality. "In the history of ideas, it's not the first time that, when you push an idea to the extreme, it becomes the contrary," he said.

He has a point. Especially when turbocharged by social media, wokeness tends to fetishize identity and bestow moral authority on whole groups by dint of historical oppression. Of the many reasonable concerns one might have with this approach, most are dismissed by its proponents as brute racism, undeserving of serious engagement. But in the Ministry of National Education's lobby sat a large school portrait of the late Samuel Paty—a literal martyr to the consequences of zealous group identification.

The key to healthy and sustainable social progress is understanding to what extent a potentially useful idea can be pursued before tipping over into self-defeating extremism. A constant trap for would-be guardians of the liberal order is a reaction that itself becomes extreme. As Mathieu Lefevre of More in Common, a nonprofit working in France and elsewhere to reunite divided societies, explained to me, wokeness "rearranges [all] the chairs at the ideological dinner party." On the one side, it fosters a kind of leftist illiberalism that is almost religious in nature, in that it brooks no dissent—the sort of ideology that center-left liberals have historically opposed. And on the other side, "being anti-woke allows a proximity between the center and the far right. You start with a [colloquium] about *le wokisme*, and you end up questioning foundational liberal principles like freedom of expression." You end up banning terms such as *institutional racism*.

This isn't merely a theoretical pitfall for the French center-left and center-right. In 2021, then–Minister of Higher Education Frédérique Vidal ordered a government investigation into public-university research that sought "to divide and fracture"—in other words, research focusing on colonialism and racial difference. The institution tasked with carrying out the investigation ultimately refused to do so, but as the sociologist François Dubet wrote in *Le Monde*, "How can we think that it is up to the State to say which currents of thought are acceptable and which are not?"

What's more, a critic might note, Blanquer's rigid devotion to the principle of universalism entails a certain blindness to often valid minority concerns—about a lack of recognition, inclusion, and dignity. Though there are no official statistics on the matter, according to a 2016 French study, young people who are perceived as Black and Arab are 20 times more likely than everyone else to be stopped by the cops. In November 2020, a video went viral showing the unprovoked pummeling of a Black music producer by armed police in Paris. I, too, ultimately believe in universalism, and I worry that obsessively tracking demographic differences can lead us to ascribe nearly anything to racism. But events like this have lent credence to the identitarian left's argument that addressing unequal treatment is nearly impossible when you can't measure it.

And so the activists and those listening to them have looked to America for a vocabulary to express what is happening in their own country, whether or not that vocabulary fully makes sense here. Wokeism's perpetual, often performative outrage; its lack of nuance; its reflexive inclination to silence dissent—these are serious flaws for those who care about liberal democracy. And yet these same qualities have attracted good-faith attention to issues too long neglected in America, and often still unmentionable in Europe.

When I asked Blanquer why he had suggested in the past that the battle against wokeness was already lost, he admitted that it was only "a provocation—I never think we'll lose." And when I asked him whether there are specific cases of cancel culture in France that compare to the most egregious cases in the U.S., he paused. Eventually, he mentioned a production of *The Suppliants*, by Aeschylus. In 2019, there were protests over the cast's use of dark makeup. But these protests were relatively small and ultimately unsuccessful. When I attended the opening-night

performance, the minister of culture was there to show solidarity against the attempted censorship. In a typical debate in America, this would be the moment when the claim is made—falsely—that cancel culture doesn't exist.

In 2010, the U.S. State Department invited French politicians and activists to a leadership program to help them strengthen the voice and representation of ethnic groups that have been excluded from government. Rokhaya Diallo attended, which many of her critics still use as evidence that she is a trained proselytizer of American social-justice propaganda. (In 2017, under pressure from both the left and the right, Macron's government asked for her removal —as Diallo put it to me, it "canceled" her—from a government advisory council, seemingly on the grounds that race- and religious-based political organizing contradicts key principles of French republicanism and secularism, or *laïcité*.)

America and France are each being undermined by internal divisions—one by overemphasizing them, the other by denying them.

But in a classified memo published on WikiLeaks, former U.S. Ambassador Charles H. Rivkin laid out the pragmatic, self-interested rationale for the program, part of what was called a "Minority Engagement Strategy":

> French institutions have not proven themselves flexible enough to adjust to an increasingly heterodox demography. We believe that if France, over the long run, does not successfully increase opportunity and provide genuine political representation for its minority populations, France could become a weaker, more divided country, perhaps more crisis-prone and inward-looking, and consequently a less capable ally.

Today, in a post-Trump America, it's impossible to read such an assessment without a sense of deep embarrassment. Still, I was haunted by these words as I watched the French elections last spring. Macron was reelected, but the results clearly showed that an identity-driven illiberalism long active on the right is gaining force on the left: Both the far left and far right gained seats in Parliament. Significant numbers of minority voters—feeling ignored and misunderstood—have grown sufficiently demoralized to give up on the center. After being replaced in May as minister of national education,

Blanquer ran for Parliament and did not even survive the first round of elections last June—coming in third behind candidates at each extreme.

Many in the French mainstream are correct to note that wokeness is philosophically incoherent—trying to end racism by elevating race—and, if taken far enough, dangerous. The politics of identity that undergirds the obsession with social justice obliterates individuality. It subordinates human psychology—always an ambiguous terrain—to sweeping platitudes and self-certain dictates; it boxes all of us in. Worst of all, it smacks of determinism, trapping the present in a never-ending past that steals the innocence from any collective future.

Le wokisme has not gone well in America. Cancel culture is quite real in the U.S., and its effects have been toxic to debate and, in many cases, to institutional decision making. Resistance to wokeism's more ambitious designs—the elimination of merit-based screening at elite public high schools; the "defunding" or even abolition of the police—has been widespread and, to many progressives' surprise, ethnically diverse. Yet its outright suppression in France has not gone well either. Ambassador Rivkin's assessment is applicable to both societies: America and France are simultaneously becoming weaker, less capable, each undermined by growing internal divisions—the one by overemphasizing them, the other by denying them altogether.

I remain convinced that an authentically color-blind society—one that recognizes histories of difference but refuses to fetishize or reproduce them—is the destination we must aim for. Either we achieve genuine universalism or we destroy ourselves as a consequence of our mutual resentment and suspicion.

Attempting this will be painful and, at times, feel counterintuitive. Woke impulses are irrepressible today, and they will likely remain so as the grand global project of building multicultural democracies continues. The question, then, is not how to stamp out these impulses, but how to channel them responsibly, while refusing to succumb to the myopia of group identity. A riff on the apocryphal Winston Churchill quip about liberal ideology describes the challenge aptly: You have no head if you wholly embrace it, but if you categorically reject it, you have no heart.

In principle, it is hard to deny the superiority of the French model of universal citizenship—*liberté*, *égalité*, *fraternité*. Yet in practice, the exhausting and sometimes disingenuous American reflex to interpret social life through imperfect notions of identity nonetheless manages to perceive real experiences that otherwise get dismissed and, when suppressed long enough, put us all in peril. It would be a mistake for either culture to remake itself entirely in the image of the other. The future belongs to the multiethnic society that finds a way to synthesize them.

This article appears in the March 2023 print edition with the headline "The French Are in a Panic Over le Wokisme*."*

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The Real Obstacle to Nuclear Power

It’s not environmentalists—it’s the nuclear-power industry itself.

by Jonathan Rauch



John Muratore and Troy Price work on a test unit at Kairos Power. The company is trying to build a new kind of nuclear plant. (Brian Finke for The Atlantic)

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"WE WERE A BIT CRAZY"

Kairos Power's new test facility is on a parched site a few miles south of the Albuquerque, New Mexico, airport. Around it, desert stretches toward hazy mountains on the horizon. The building looks like a factory or a warehouse; nothing about it betrays the moonshot exercise happening within. There, digital readouts count down the minutes, T-minus style, until power begins flowing to a test unit simulating the blistering heat of a new kind of nuclear reactor. In this test run, electricity, not uranium, will furnish the energy; graphite-encased fuel pebbles, each about the size of a golf ball, will be dummies containing no radioactive material. But everything else will be true to life, including the molten fluoride salt that will flow through the device to cool it. If all goes according to plan, the system—never tried before—will control and regulate a simulated chain reaction. When I glance at a countdown clock behind the receptionist during a visit last May, it says 31 days, 8 hours, 9 minutes, and 22 seconds until the experiment begins.

The test unit looks surprisingly unimpressive: a shiny cylindrical drum only about 16 feet tall, resembling an oversize water heater. The scale is unlike that of an existing commercial nuclear plant. Forget about those airport-scale compounds with their fortresslike containment enclosures and 40-story cooling towers belching steam. This reactor will sit in an ordinary building the size of, say, a suburban self-storage facility. It will be made in factories for easy shipping and rapid assembly. Customers will be able to buy just one, to power a chemical or steel plant, or a few, linked like batteries, to power a city. Most important, even if a local disaster cuts the power to the cooling system and safety systems fail, this reactor will not melt down, spew radioactive material, or become too hot and dangerous to approach. It will remain stable until normal conditions are restored.

Small and safe is the vision, at least. Dozens of companies and labs in the U.S. and abroad are pursuing it. Kairos is well along, with a permit to build a full-fledged nuclear test reactor already moving toward federal approval, hopefully by the end of 2023. That test will depend on this one in Albuquerque, because molten-salt reactor cooling has not been tried in the

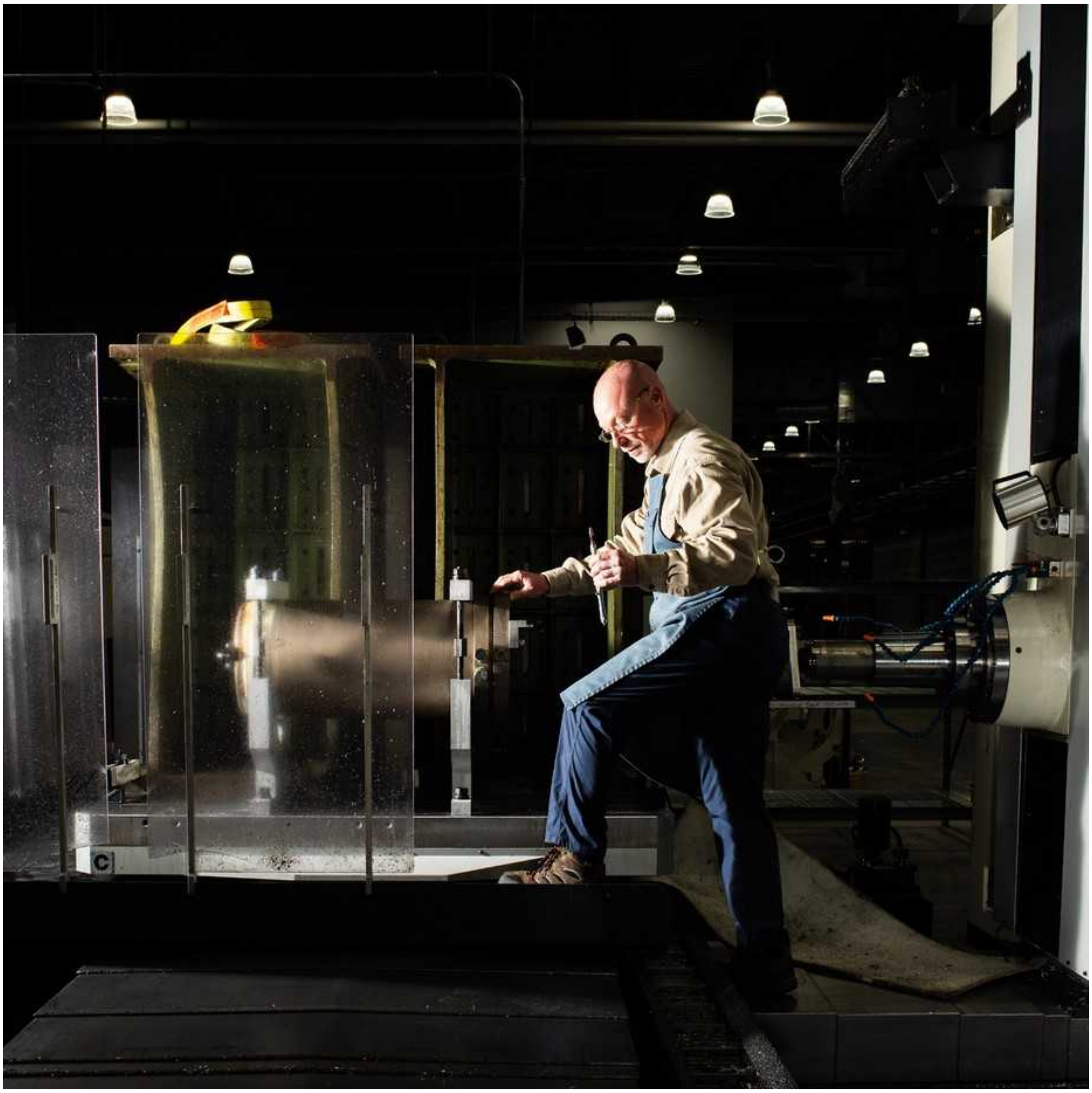
United States since the 1960s, when a five-year experiment at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory, in Tennessee, proved the idea viable. In a few days, the test unit's top will be installed, crowning the device with bristling pipes and sensors. Nearby, welders ready those pipes and valves. Engineers stand on top of scaffolding slotting graphite reflectors into place.

As I tour the facility, however, I soon realize that the crucial technology is not 16 feet tall but about 5 foot 6, balding, with jeans and thick, black-framed glasses. John Muratore runs this test operation and, as you would expect, is an experienced engineer; as you might not expect, he is a space engineer, not a nuclear one. As a boy in the '60s, he was the archetypal kid who built model planes and joined the rocketry club and never stopped daydreaming about human flight. He spent 24 years working for NASA, where he was a flight controller for the space-shuttle program under the legendary flight director Gene Kranz, of *Apollo 13* movie fame. Then he spent a decade working for SpaceX, Elon Musk's world-beating private spaceflight company. Nuclear power wasn't on his radar until recently, when Kairos's executives called him for advice and wound up recruiting him. "A lot of it was the same," he told me. "A launchpad and a nuclear reactor have a lot in common"—extreme temperatures, and many tons of concrete, and lots of pipes and valves and sensors and controls that must work together with extreme precision.

There's another, more significant similarity: "The industry is hobbled by costs and schedule overruns, as was the launch industry prior to SpaceX." Managing complex projects—and bringing new vigor to old ideas—is something Muratore's 40 years in the space industry have taught him a lot about.

Nuclear power is in a strange position today. Those who worry about climate change have come to see that it is essential. The warming clock is ticking—another sort of countdown—and replacing fossil fuels is much easier with nuclear power in the equation. And yet the industry, in many respects, looks unready to step into a major role. It has consistently flopped as a commercial proposition. Decade after decade, it has broken its promises to deliver new plants on budget and on time, and, despite an enviable safety record, it has failed to put to rest the public's fear of catastrophic accidents. Many of the

industry’s best minds know they need a new approach, and soon. For inspiration, some have turned toward SpaceX, Tesla, and Apple.



Michael Thomas, a Kairos machinist, loads a part into a milling machine for modifications. (Brian Finke for *The Atlantic)*

“Yeah, we were a bit crazy to try to do this,” Per Peterson, Kairos’s co-founder and chief nuclear officer, told me when I asked about starting a company from scratch and setting out to make the nuclear industry agile and competitive. “But I don’t remember ever lacking the confidence that it was feasible for us to do what we wanted to do.” The fate of the industry, and in

some measure the planet, depends on whether he and like-minded entrepreneurs can finally keep their promises.

"WHY CAN'T YOU BUILD US A NUCLEAR PLANT?"

When I started reporting this article, I imagined it might be a diatribe against the environmental movement's resistance to nuclear power. For a generation or more, the United States has been fighting climate change—and all the other ills that result from fossil fuels—with one hand tied behind its back. Bruce Babbitt, a former secretary of the interior and governor of Arizona, was on a presidential commission to evaluate nuclear power after the Three Mile Island plant's partial meltdown in 1979, the U.S. industry's worst accident. Though no one died or was even injured—and the accident led to new protocols and training under which the plant's second, intact reactor operated uneventfully until 2019—the accident hardened the public and environmentalists against nuclear energy. After that, as Babbitt told me, "opposition in the environmental community was near unanimous. The position was 'No new nuclear plants, and we should phase out the existing nuclear base.'" Which was the road the U.S. took. Today legacy nuclear power supplies about 20 percent of American electricity, but the country has fired up only one new power reactor since 1996.

From an environmental point of view, this seems like a perverse strategy, because nuclear power, as most people know, is carbon-free—and is also, as fewer people realize, fantastically safe. Only the 1986 accident at Chernobyl, in Ukraine, has caused mass fatalities from radioactivity, and the plant there was subpar and mismanaged, by Western standards. Excluding Chernobyl, the total number of deaths attributed to a radiation accident at a commercial nuclear-power plant is zero or one, depending on your interpretation of Japan's 2011 Fukushima accident. The Fukushima *evacuation* certainly caused deaths; Japanese authorities have estimated that more than 2,000 people may have died from disruptions in services such as nursing care and from stress-related factors such as alcoholism and depression. (Some experts now believe that the evacuation was far too large.) Even so, Japan's decision to shut down its nuclear plants has been estimated to cause multiples of that death toll, on account of the increased fossil-fuel pollution that followed.

The real challenge with giant nuclear plants like Fukushima and Three Mile Island is not making them safe but doing so at a reasonable price, which is the problem that companies like Kairos are trying to solve. But even people who feel scared of nuclear power do not dispute that fossil fuels are orders of magnitude more dangerous. One study, published in 2021, estimated that air pollution from fossil fuels killed about 1 million people in 2017 alone. In fact, nuclear power's safety record to date is easily on par with the wind and solar industries, because wind turbines and rooftop panels create minor risks such as falls and fire. As for nuclear waste, it has turned out to be a surprisingly manageable problem, partly because there isn't much of it; all of the spent fuel the U.S. nuclear industry has ever created could be buried under a single football field to a depth of less than 10 yards, according to the Department of Energy. Unlike coal waste, which is of course spewed into the air we breathe, radioactive waste is stored in carefully monitored casks.

And so environmentalists, I thought, were betraying the environment by stigmatizing nuclear power. But I had to revise my view. Even without green opposition, nuclear power as we knew it would have fizzled—today's environmentalists are not the main obstacle to its wide adoption.

To be sure, environmentalists do not love nuclear power. They much prefer solar and wind. But as Babbitt told me, "They're all coming around. The attitudes in the environmental community are perceptibly changing." Although only a handful of the mainline environmental organizations are openly "nuclear inclusive" (for example, the Nature Conservancy), many quietly accept that nuclear power can be part of the climate solution, and perhaps a necessary part.

Because solar and wind power are inherently intermittent, they require other energy sources to even out peaks and dips. Natural gas and coal can do that, but of course the goal is to retire them. Batteries can help but are much too expensive to rely on at present, and mining, manufacturing, and disposing of them entail their own environmental harms. Also, nuclear power is the only efficient way to provide zero-carbon heat for high-temperature industrial processes such as steelmaking, which account for about a fifth of energy consumption.

Perhaps most important, adding solar and wind capacity becomes more expensive and controversial as the most accessible land is used up. Nuclear energy’s footprint is extremely small. Solar-energy production uses dozens of times as much land per unit of energy produced; wind uses much more land than that. According to congressional testimony by Armond Cohen of the Clean Air Task Force, meeting all of the eastern United States’ energy needs might require 100,000 square miles of solar panels (an area greater than New England) or more than 800,000 square miles of onshore windmills (Alaska plus California), versus only a bit over 500 square miles of nuclear plants (the city of Phoenix, Arizona). Given the amount of real estate that solar and wind farms usurp, efforts to place them are running into entirely predictable local resistance, which will only increase as the easiest and cheapest sites are picked off.

Finally, as low- and middle-income countries develop over the next several decades, they will almost double the world’s demand for electricity. Total global energy consumption will rise by 30 percent by 2050, according to the International Energy Agency. Meeting this challenge while reducing carbon emissions will be much harder, if not impossible, without a nuclear assist.



Left: Javier Talamantes, a Kairos technologist, installs one of the thousands of sensors that feed data
to the test unit. *Right:* A sensor monitors environmental oxygen levels to

ensure the safety of personnel working on the unit. (Brian Finke for *The Atlantic)*

Recognizing as much, three consecutive administrations—Barack Obama's, Donald Trump's, and now Joe Biden's—have included next-generation nuclear power in their policy agenda. Both parties in Congress support federal R&D funding, which has run into the billions in the past few years. Two-thirds of the states have told the Associated Press they want to include nuclear power in their green-energy plans. "Today the topic of new nuclear is front of mind for all our member utilities," says Doug True, a senior vice president and the chief nuclear officer of the Nuclear Energy Institute, an industry trade group. "We have states saying, 'Why can't you build us a nuclear plant?'"

Thanks to those developments, the table is set for nuclear power in a way that has not been true for two generations. So what is the main problem for the nuclear-power industry? In sum: the nuclear-power industry.

"WE GOT BOGGED DOWN"

The U.S. has two big commercial reactors under construction, both at the same site in Georgia. The licensing process for them began in 2008; construction began in 2012, with a projected price of $14 billion and start-up planned for 2017 at the latest. As of February 2022, the projected cost had mushroomed to $30 billion, and the reactors still aren't open. (Hopefully in 2023, the sponsoring utility says.)

No one who knows the industry is surprised. In the United States, construction delays on the Georgia reactors and others drove Westinghouse, the company building them, into bankruptcy. France started building a new reactor at its Flamanville plant in 2007, planning to open it in five years; as of this writing, it is still not ready. Britain approved a major plant in 2008 and probably won't turn it on until 2027, and the project is 50 percent over budget. Delays and cost overruns are so routine that they are simply assumed. "Nuclear as it exists today," Mike Laufer, a co-founder and the CEO of Kairos Power, told me, "is clean, it's reliable, it's safe. But it's not affordable"—at least when it comes to building new plants—"and this is

what's holding nuclear back from a much bigger role in fighting climate change."

Industry veterans recall the 1950s and '60s as a time of new ideas and experimentation in nuclear power. For scientists and engineers, the atom had the same kind of romantic, adventurous appeal as the space program. In 1968, a company called General Atomics got a license to build a gas-cooled reactor in Colorado, a new design and potentially the start of a new era. Instead, it proved to be the industry's last stab at fundamental innovation. Thanks to incremental upgrades, today's legacy nuclear plants cost almost 40 percent less to run than they did in 2012, according to the Nuclear Energy Institute, but if you had fallen asleep in the '70s and awakened today, you would recognize the basic nuclear-power model as the same, both technologically and as a business proposition.

In particular, you would see the same gigantic plants and staggering building costs. In the 1970s, the industry stopped pursuing alternatives to using water to cool the hot nuclear core and transfer heat to steam turbines generating electricity. Water worked fine, but it had to be held under extreme pressure to stay fluid at fission temperatures, and if it boiled off, meltdowns were an inherent risk. Accidents could be reliably prevented, but only by building in elaborate safety measures, all of which necessitated costly engineering and heavy regulatory oversight. One executive likens constructing this style of plant to building a pyramid point-down: You could do it, but only with some heroic engineering. Reactors needed electric-powered pumps, and redundant cooling systems in case those failed, and massive containment structures in case those failed. The need for all of that redundancy and mass raised costs, inducing utility companies to seek economies of scale by making big reactors. Designing giant plants, each bespoke for a specific site, took years; licensing and building them took years more. "We got bogged down," Kairos's Peterson explained. "As we made plants bigger, we also made them unconstructable." The creativity of the '60s gave way to an industry that became, as John Muratore, the Kairos engineer, told me, "very formal, very bureaucratic, very slow, driven by safety concerns." Meanwhile, as plants became ever more expensive, the relative cost of fossil fuels was declining and renewables were coming online—and, after the accident at Three Mile Island, public hostility became a problem, too.



Left to right: The Kairos Power co-founders Mike Laufer, Per Peterson, and Edward Blandford outside the facility in Albuquerque, New Mexico. (Brian Finke for *The Atlantic)*

And so, in a generation, nuclear power went from the fuel of the future to not worth the bother. Supply chains withered; talented engineers and executives sought greener pastures. The United States, once the industry's world leader, became an also-ran. Today, as Peterson said, we find ourselves "mired in this world where all you can get are light-water reactors, and they're challenging and expensive to build, and we don't have good alternatives. Breaking out of that set of problems is one of the critical things

we need to do today.” That requires technological breakthroughs; more important, however, it requires attitudinal ones.

“BUILD A LITTLE, TEST A LITTLE, FIX A LITTLE”

Born in Brooklyn in 1956, John Muratore remembers visiting the 1964–65 World’s Fair, where an exhibit touted the energy of the atom in all its futuristic glory. He got an irradiated dime there and carried it around for years. (He now has a replacement that he bought on eBay.) Still, flight was his obsession, and so he took his Yale engineering degree to the Air Force’s aerospace program and then, perhaps inevitably, to NASA. After achieving his dream of serving as flight director—he oversaw five space-shuttle missions, including the first repair of the Hubble Space Telescope—he shifted to developing mission-control software. “We used a rapid iterative-build technology,” he told me, meaning that his team figured out how to develop new features in months instead of the previously customary years. The operative philosophy was *build a little, test a little, fix a little*.

That led him and some of his colleagues to wonder: Could they build a spacecraft the same way? In place of projects that were perfected on paper before ever being tried in space, could Silicon Valley–style trial and error work at NASA? He joined a team that used exactly those methods to build the X-38, an emergency-reentry vehicle for astronauts on the International Space Station. Again, the team built, tested, fixed, and then repeated the cycle, learning by iterating. After a series of flights in which it was dropped from planes at varying altitudes, the X-38 was on the verge of its decisive space trial when the George W. Bush administration canceled it in a fit of parsimony. That disappointment eventually led Muratore out of NASA and, after an interlude as a professor, to SpaceX.

SpaceX was one of several private-sector competitors in a NASA program to relaunch, as it were, crewed spaceflight. The company set ambitious schedules and took big risks, a method that had its downsides: Prototypes blew up. But SpaceX proved its point. Today it is worth about $125 billion and has transformed spaceflight from a government program to a viable commercial business.

Per Peterson was among those who noticed how quickly and thoroughly SpaceX had revolutionized a staid (and in some ways troubled) industry. By his own account, Peterson had grown up “a bit of a flaming environmentalist and pretty liberal”; he put himself through college working in a bike shop before getting his doctorate, becoming an expert on heat transfer, and, as a professor at UC Berkeley in the 1990s, researching how to make nuclear-power plants safer. He came to understand how molten salt could replace water to cool a reactor core. Unlike water, molten salt stays liquid at high temperatures, so it doesn’t require ultrahigh pressurization and won’t boil away. That lets engineers dispense with heavy containment structures, allowing for smaller, cheaper, safer reactors.



Left: In-house machinery produces custom components, allowing Kairos Power to create and test prototypes quickly. *Right:* Muratore supervises operations in the on-site control room. (Brian Finke for *The Atlantic)*

Salt cooling is a technology that dates back to the 1960s but has not yet been successfully commercialized. Peterson, Mike Laufer, and a third colleague named Edward Blandford thought they could make that breakthrough by applying SpaceX’s methods. They founded Kairos in Oakland, California, in 2017, and today they have 300 employees, including Muratore, whom they nabbed in 2020. At the Kairos test center in Albuquerque, Muratore showed me an on-site machine shop—run by another SpaceX veteran—where engineers can fabricate parts in a matter of hours, and then walk them over

to the test unit to see how they perform, and then refine and rework them. The idea is to make any errors fast and early, before they cause delays and overruns, and to learn during the design process how to simplify and speed up real-world manufacturing. Build a little, test a little, fix a little.

“WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU GO SMALLER?”

Peterson and his colleagues were not the only people to be frustrated by the industry’s failures, nor were they the only ones to launch ambitious start-ups. José Reyes, for instance, the Manhattan-born child of a Honduran father and a Dominican mother, was attracted to nuclear power in the go-go years of the 1970s, before Three Mile Island and ballooning costs kneecapped the industry. After training as a nuclear engineer, he worked for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and then, at Oregon State University, on reactor design and testing. “I wanted to build something that was remarkably safe,” he told me. And he was intrigued by the countercultural idea of inverting traditional assumptions about economies of scale. “What happens when you go smaller?” he started to wonder. “That was kind of a surprise. You can start making these in factories.” In 2007, he co-founded NuScale Power to bring his concept to market. He says the company plans to deliver its first commercial reactor in 2027.

In my interviews with nuclear entrepreneurs like Peterson and Reyes, a pattern developed. The newcomers have engineering backgrounds but few if any ties to traditional nuclear utilities. They think that climate change is a dire problem, that nuclear power can ameliorate it, and that time is short. They don’t believe that conventional thinking offers sufficient answers, and so they take inspiration from elsewhere. Clay Sell, the CEO of an advanced-nuclear company called X-energy, cited both SpaceX and Apple, likening the company’s design process to the creation of the iPhone. Francesco Venneri, the Italian-born founder of a company he named (lest anyone miss the point) Ultra Safe Nuclear, said, “The model we’re trying to imitate is Tesla.”

The engineering choices that these companies and entrepreneurs are making vary. For instance, NuScale’s designs use water as the coolant, but rely on convection and gravity, not pumps, so they stay cool if electricity fails; Ultra Safe’s and X-energy’s use helium gas. TerraPower, another competitor,

recently launched its own test of salt cooling, but using a different kind of salt from Kairos's. What these diverse efforts share philosophically, though, is much more important than their technological differences: They seek to invert the industry's lethargic, scale-driven business model. They think of themselves as building airplanes instead of airports—that is, as shifting the industry paradigm to mass production. (NuScale thinks it could sell three modular reactors a month; Ultra Safe hopes to start with 10 a year.) They all believe they can make nuclear fission inherently safe—and, crucially, win the public's confidence.

Today Kairos, NuScale, Ultra Safe, and X-energy all say they can deploy advanced commercial reactors before the decade is out. The space is now rife with contenders; Third Way has identified nearly 150 companies and national labs around the world that are working on small, advanced nuclear reactors. The needed technologies are here. The goal is defined. So we're back to the same old question: Can the industry deliver?

Some skepticism is warranted. Even if the innovators can eventually crack the code of affordable mass production, their Version 1.0 products won't be cheap; to get launched, they will need risk-friendly investors and customers, as well as backing from Congress, the Energy Department, and government labs, not unlike the NASA incentives that propelled SpaceX. Perhaps the single biggest challenge, and one SpaceX did not face, is to modernize the slow-moving federal regulatory apparatus, which was built in our parents and grandparents' era, when schedules were relaxed and cost overruns were fobbed off on utility customers.



Kairos Power, in Albuquerque, New Mexico (Brian Finke for *The Atlantic)*

Still, I came away from my conversations about the industry convinced that today presents the best opportunity in two generations for reinvention to take hold. The perception that the fight against runaway global warming could be lost within the next 20 years is a powerful motivator. So, too, is the realization that continued global reliance on oil and gas is a boon to democracy's adversaries, most notably Russia. And if the United States fails to develop a competitive nuclear industry, our rivals will be happy to fill the gap. Russia is the predominant supplier of nuclear-power reactors in the global market, and China, which plans to build more domestic reactors in the

next 15 years than the rest of the world has built in the past 35, hopes to elbow Russia aside. Those countries are also in the race to perfect the advanced, unconventional technologies that Kairos and its competitors are pursuing; China, for example, hopes to deploy a salt-cooled commercial reactor around 2030. Of course, we can assume that China and Russia will exploit any geostrategic leverage they can gain by dominating the global nuclear business. For reasons of grand strategy—as well as for safety and reliability—it would be better if U.S. companies and technologies were in the lead. All of this is on the minds of bureaucrats and politicians today.

“IT’S ALL VERY SIMILAR”

In September, I joined a Zoom call to check on the progress of Kairos Power’s simulation experiment in Albuquerque. I saw the control room I had toured several months earlier: two rows of computer monitors facing a bank of screens that show video feeds and data streams. Besides John Muratore, only two operators—a test director and a test engineer—were in the room. Dozens of other engineers and executives monitored the proceedings from afar. The test didn’t present much of a spectacle. Supply-chain problems with heaters had delayed the launch by several weeks, but in August electricity had begun flowing into the shiny drum that mimicked an advanced reactor. Inside the simulator, hundreds of sensors dispatched data to the control room as the core’s temperature rose to the levels of a nuclear reaction.

That day, it measured almost 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit. Yet according to Muratore, the test unit was cool to the touch. At that high temperature, he told me, the system had been stable for several days, though hot spots needed attention. Early in 2023, after the hardware passed muster, salt would be introduced for weeks of evaluating and tweaking. With the results in hand, the company would begin construction of its full-fledged test reactor, with live nuclear fuel, in Oak Ridge—the same place the previous U.S. experiment with a salt-cooled reactor had been conducted, back in the 1960s. What’s old is new again.

Or rather, to be more precise, what is newest and potentially most significant about Kairos’s test is not a technological invention. Rather, it is innovation more broadly conceived. First and foremost, Kairos is devising not a nuclear

technology but a business technology: a method of organizing a very complex project to be faster, simpler, more efficient, and cheaper. This kind of process innovation may not look like much, but it's what nuclear power needs if it is to fulfill its extraordinary promise.

As my virtual tour wound down, I asked to meet the test director. Up from behind a monitor popped Davis Libbey. When I asked about his background, he said he was a recent recruit from—I should have seen this coming—SpaceX. John Muratore had snapped him up just a few months earlier. Apart from having to deal with very hot rather than very cold temperatures, he said, switching from spaceflight to nuclear power had been seamless. "From a control-room standpoint, this is very much what you'd see in South Texas or Hawthorne," he said, referring to a SpaceX launch site and to its headquarters in California. "It's all very similar."

For the sake of the nuclear industry and the planet, we need to hope so.

WHAT ABOUT NUCLEAR WASTE?

In 1987, Congress authorized a national nuclear-waste repository at Yucca Mountain, in Nevada; for good measure, it banned permanently storing nuclear waste anywhere else. Unfortunately, that repository never opened and, thanks to obstacles both political and practical, apparently never will. Meanwhile, nuclear waste sits safely but only (in theory) temporarily at reactor sites around the country. To win public acceptance, Elizabeth Muller told me recently, the nuclear industry needs to resolve the waste problem, not just downplay it.

Muller is in her early 40s, the daughter of a physics professor. Alarmed by climate change, in 2010 she and her father started a climate-science nonprofit, Berkeley Earth, which argued that replacing coal with shale gas (a controversial proposition among some environmentalists, because it involves the water-injection process known as fracking) had to be part of the solution in the near term—and that the longer-term transition from hydrocarbons would require more nuclear power.

From their focus on natural gas, the Mullers knew that, by using computer-assisted directional drilling, an oil or gas rig can drill for miles in any

direction, not just straight down but nosing horizontally along rich seams deep underground. (This transformative technology enabled the fracking revolution.) At a forum in 2015, Muller and her father, Richard Muller, heard a presentation about using boreholes to deposit nuclear waste in deep geological strata that have been stable for epochs. Her father, Muller said, “immediately thought of drilling horizontally into shale formations that have held volatile materials for millions of years.” Because geological strata are stacked horizontally, like pancakes, a vertical hole passes rapidly through them, exposing little area for potential storage. Instead, by drilling sideways to follow a suitable formation, “you get a lot more space at a given depth.” That creates more storage options at any given location, without having to truck waste to some distant (and currently nonexistent) repository.

Months after that forum, the Mullers founded a company, Deep Isolation. In 2018, they received seed funding, and the following year they showed that a drill rig on the surface could deposit specially designed waste canisters in horizontal boreholes, then later retrieve them, without any humans needing to work underground. The demonstration opened the possibility that waste can be safely stored, monitored, and if need be recovered near the sites that produce it, where communities are already accustomed to having nuclear neighbors. The company now employs about 50 people, Muller told me, and has won customer contracts in multiple countries, including the United States.

Can Deep Isolation succeed? Maybe, maybe not, but its greater significance is as an example of how the Big Nuclear mindset is cracking. Even a few years ago, the idea of an unconventional commercial start-up taking on the most intractable problem the industry faces—a problem that has defeated billions of dollars and ambitious government planning—would have seemed far-fetched, if not inconceivable.

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Society Tells Me to Celebrate My Disability. What If I Don’t Want To?

On living with cerebral palsy

by Emil Sands



Emil Sands, 2022. "Self-Portrait in the Locker Room." Oil on Canvas.

My memory of the moment, almost a decade ago, is indelible: the sight of a swimmer's back, both sides equal—each as good and righteous as the other.

An ordinary thing, and something I had never had, and still don't have. To think of that moment is to feel torn—once again—about how I should respond to my condition: whether to own it, which would be the brave response, as well as the proper one, in many people's eyes; or to regret it, even try to conceal it, which is my natural response.

I have a form of cerebral palsy called hemiplegia, which affects one side of the body. The word has two parts: *hemi*, meaning "half," and *plegia*, connoting stroke or paralysis. I have had a "half stroke," but I prefer the romance of my high-school Greek teacher's translation: I was, as he put it, *struck on one side*. Plus, it's a more accurate description of what happened to me. At birth, the forceps used to pull me out of the womb pierced my baby-soft skull and damaged my cerebral motor cortex. On my left temple is a tiny scar left by the forceps and shaped, rather unfortunately, I've always thought, like an upside-down cross—the anti-Christ symbol.

I look, I'm told, basically normal. I am not in a wheelchair. I have good control of my limbs. I write and I paint. I can do most everyday tasks. Although my symptoms are typical—muscular tightness, limited movement ability, poor muscle development—they are mild. For this reason, everyone calls me lucky. And it's true—compared with other kids in the waiting room of the cerebral-palsy ward, I was lucky, extremely lucky. But still, I never asked to be in that waiting room. I did not look like those kids inside the hospital—would balk at being classed with them, even—but my body didn't fit in outside the hospital either. Doctors, friends, parents—a platoon of people who have never experienced what I have—commend me on my normalness. This always makes me feel accomplished, until I realize that what they really mean is: *Normal, considering …*

When I was a child, my symptoms were more pronounced than they are now. I simplified my deformities: I had a Good Side and a Bad Side, even telling kids at primary school that half my penis didn't work (I had to have some fun). My Good Side, my left, was my superhero; I was actually right-handed, but taught myself to use the superhero side. My Bad Side, my right, was a cave-dwelling creature, a Caliban, a spindly, weak, shameful thing that I'd hit with my left hand when I was angry. I used to scream at my mother, crying, *You did this. You gave birth to this.*

I had a noticeable limp. My right heel couldn't get to the floor, which left me on perpetual tiptoe. Unless my foot was strapped into a splint, my ankle couldn't reach 90 degrees—the doctors' acid test of normality. I needed shoes of two different sizes to allow for the added width of my daytime splint. My mother would explain the situation to shop assistants as I sat on the little sofa waiting for my mismatched shoes to arrive. Their faces turned to pity, or something like disgust. Did they think I was contagious? My nighttime splint had no give whatsoever. When I'd get up to pee in the night, waddling along in the strange walk that the splint forced on me, I'd pass my bathroom mirror and stare. Despite the crocodile pattern the nurse had let me choose, it all looked so medical, so unnatural—so, well, disabled. And I would think, *I am not this*.

Read: A disability film unlike any other

As if to make it official, my doctor said, "You do not have motor skills." I've never been able to move just one finger on my right hand, for example. If one finger is moving, they're all dancing some uncoordinated dance. I needed help in class. I found it tricky to cut and paste, to organize myself, or to write for long periods of time, because my hand would cramp. It was humiliating enough to have a personal classroom assistant, but the assistant, Yulia, also had to massage my foot each morning to relax my muscles. She wasn't popular with the other kids at school. Her foreign accent, tough manner, and short haircut made her a prime target for crude, all-boys-school-style ridicule. I often found it easier to join in than to defend her. I wanted everyone to think I didn't need her. She never cared about the other kids being rude. But if she overheard me, she'd look at me with eyes that made it clear I was betraying her.

I would meet her in the black box of my primary-school drama studio half an hour before classes began. I'd take off my shoe, splint, and sock. She'd squeeze Johnson's Baby Oil onto her hands and then take my foot roughly—kneading and pushing and pulling it. I would apologize again and again in my head. *I'm sorry you have to do this. I'm sorry I'm like this.*

Sometimes another kid would walk in. My body would revolt in panic—I'd squirm away from Yulia, desperately ashamed of the vision of my naked foot and ankle, moist with oil, poking out of my trouser leg. Something

haunted me about the fleshy color of my skin with nowhere to hide in that black, black room. I'd pull my sock back on as quickly as humanly possible and sit there, staring at the floor, until Yulia firmly asked him to leave. When he'd gone, she'd reach an arm out, indicating that I should take my sock off once more.

At age 12, I beat my lifelong best friend—a boy I'd been in diapers with—in a tennis match at his grandfather's house. He didn't like losing, and he screamed from the baseline, "You disabled cunt." I ran inside. In the kitchen, sobbing, I bumped into his grandfather and his mother—incidentally, my mother's best friend—who asked what was wrong. I began to tell her, a woman I'd known all my life, a woman who'd known about my disability before I could even speak, and she lifted a finger in the air and said, "Ah. Don't mention names. No one likes snitches." I turned to his grandfather, hopeful, but he simply said, "No one said that to you, Emil." I expected kids to be nasty, but had thought adults grew out of it.

As I prepared to leave primary school, I was also preparing for an operation on my Achilles tendon, which would mitigate my limp. The operation was scheduled for the final day of the school year, and so while every other boy in my class piled into a bus headed for a theme park to go on rides with names like Stealth and Nemesis Inferno, I was driven to a hospital in the suburbs of London. My mother spent the day reminding me that I'd never liked roller coasters anyway. I was given a wheelchair until I could walk again, but after one day of being eyed by strangers, I opted for crutches. I longed to hold a sign that read THIS CHAIR IS TEMPORARY. I AM LIKE YOU. My cast eventually came off, my heel now reached the ground, and my strange, clodhopping gait was gone.



Emil Sands, 2022. *Three Figures*. Oil on paper, collage.

I moved on to secondary school. No more splints, no more personal assistants, no more massages, no more limp. My parents assured me: *Normal starts now.* But that was not true. I was hit with a new regime—a twice-daily therapy program of swimming, stretching, and working with weights.

Each morning, I arrived in the funky-smelling changing room of my all-boys school sometime between 7:15 and 7:30. I found a space on the bench and a corresponding peg that wasn't already littered with the chucked-off black-and-maroon ties, white shirts, trousers, sports bags, and boxers of the swim squad, which got there before me. In order to minimize my time spent naked, I was already wearing my regulation Speedo trunks under my uniform. I took off my own tie, shirt, and trousers and dumped them in my black-and-blue Sports Direct bag, which I carefully hung up.

Looking down at my nearly naked body, I longed for a different one. Something about puberty had made me fat, like a baby: My stomach ballooned out so that I could only just find the tips of my toes beyond it. My Good Side looked exactly that—good. But my Bad Side remained a perpetual disappointment. The swimming was meant to mitigate the effects of my disability, but swimming was the last thing I wanted to do.

Read: Doctors are failing patients with disabilities

The changing room connected directly to the pool, and the stench of chlorine was unavoidable. With nowhere else to go in this windowless part of the gym complex, it found your nose and clogged it. From my seat in the changing room, I could hear the swim squad, which had already been training for 40 minutes—the reverberating splashes, the critical shouts, the coach's whistle. Their sonic booms stretched up past the viewing gallery to the ceiling and crashed back down again, echoing off the water.

I made my way through the corridor to the pool, holding my arms around my tummy. A mass of indistinguishable squad muscle—here a lean leg, there a powerful arm, there a goggled head on a bull-muscled neck—filled four of the pool's five lanes. I approached the fifth—the teachers' lane—and reluctantly lowered myself in. This was the only place where the school and

swim coach could think to put me. My elderly French teacher was usually in there already, breast-stroking at the same pace his lessons went. Of everyone in this pool, it was his team I was somehow put on.

His back was the mightiest thing I'd ever seen. Everywhere you looked it was packed with muscles. And the symmetry!

Even underwater, I attempted to cover my wibbling fat, knowing that the squad's goggles allowed for plain viewing of my body. As I went up and down the pool, doing my customary half-swim, half-walk, their thoughts consumed me. Did they know why I was in their pool? Had their coach told them? Did they care? Scarier still, were they so passionate about their sport that they didn't even notice me?

After swimming, they filed back into the changing room. They were teammates: not exactly friends, but they shared a closeness. They laughed about races won and lost. They stretched out, leaned over, bent down. Like ancient Greeks in the gymnasium, they had bodies that were a total luxury. I showered in my trunks after them, then hurried to a private cubicle to change into my underwear, all the time careful to avoid the mirrors that lined the walls. I covered my body with towels, hands, arms, anything at all so that no one, myself included, could see it in its entirety.

When one of the swimmers was dressed and ready to leave, the others shouted a goodbye and nodded, lifting their head and their eyebrows together in a way that encompassed the entirety of masculine prowess. But not once in all the years I changed with them did any of the swimmers look my way.

Well, there was one time, actually. Marcus was a boy, two or three years ahead of me, whom everyone either knew or knew of. He was, as far as I could tell, everything anyone could ever want to be. We never spoke—why on earth would we?—but so powerful was his physical presence that I became acutely aware of my lumbering body if he so much as walked past me in the school corridor. He seemed to be taller than anyone else in his year, although that probably wasn't the case. He was always greeting people, stretching out an arm and a hand for some über-cool, effortless handshake.

The incident occurred when I was 15 or 16. I came out of the pool late, and only Marcus and a friend of his were still getting changed. By this point, my body had morphed slightly. I still felt overweight and cumbersome, and my disability still left half of my body lacking, but the past three years of training had at least made me look more like others my age. After showering, I went back to my bag and began getting dressed.

Marcus was in his underwear with his back facing me. I don't know quite what happened that day, but some deep-set mixture of jealousy, longing, and desire prevented me from looking away. His back was the mightiest thing I'd ever seen. Everywhere you looked it was packed with muscles. And the symmetry! He turned and Achilles was standing there in the locker room. I traced every contour, every ebb of his body, with my eyes, inventorying every part of him that I was not.

I came to, and realized that both Marcus and his friend were standing there, watching me staring at him. There were codes, and I, a locker-room weirdo, had just broken them.

"Dude," said the friend to Marcus, cutting the silence with a cruel splutter of laughter, "I think someone likes what he sees."

Marcus started laughing and mock-provocatively tensed his body in my direction. "You want a piece of me, Sands?"

And while I did a double take—had he just said my name?—I understood how far away from these boys I was. How, if I answered his question honestly, the truth would be out: *No, I don't want a piece of you. I want all of you. I want to have what you have.*

I said nothing. I backed away into a bathroom stall. I didn't come out again until they had left.

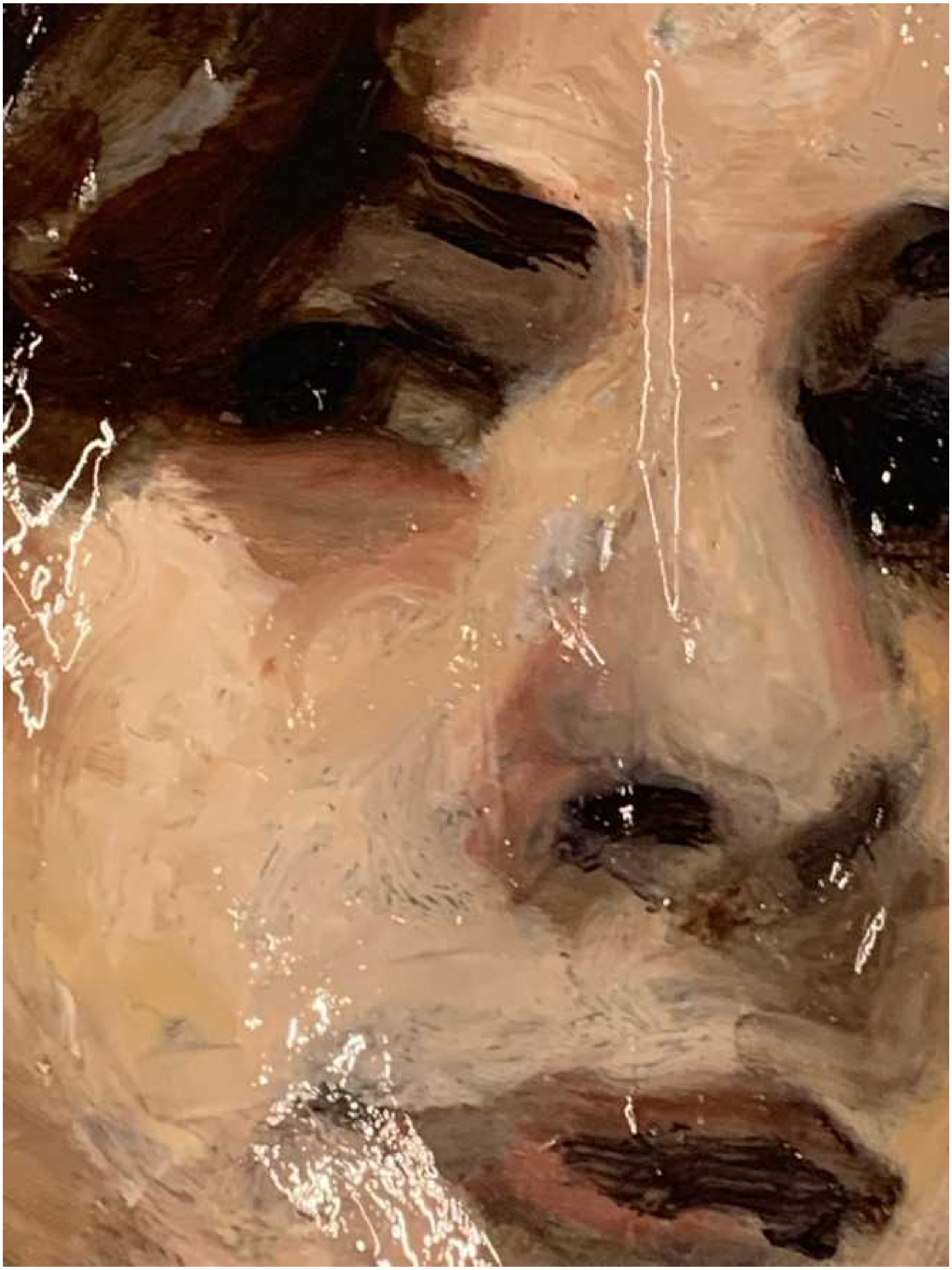
I stopped swimming a few months after this, defying my parents, my school, and the medical committee that oversaw my rehabilitation. I had developed psychosomatic symptoms that made it unfeasible for me to carry on. At around the same time in the morning as I would start my swim, I would begin to hear a chorus of voices in my head. They screamed at me in a dark

gibberish. Although it wasn't English, I knew what they were telling me: I was worthless, useless. I would stop mid-stroke and hold my hands to my ears, trying to make them stop. At first, I thought the water had made my ears go funny. But the voices grew louder, darker, and more overwhelming. There were more hospital appointments. More concerned doctors. A specialist wondered if we knew the word *schizophrenia*.

When I stopped swimming, the voices stopped too, suggesting that the episodes were a result of some severe anxiety connected with the pool. As a deal, I swapped my five swims a week for more time in the gym and more stretching. I preferred this. For one, I could be clothed. But more than that, I could work toward goals that were less about competition and more about personal growth: getting big arms or a six-pack, having a meal plan based on eating lots of proteins. Things that most boys my age wanted.

As I understand now, my disability pushed me harder. Closed doors draw attention to open ones. When I was in my early teens, I competed for my school's annual reading prize: First place went to the student who was best at delivering a poem or short story aloud. I got through the heats easily. Backstage, at the final, I watched as others nervously ambled about, familiarizing themselves with the Keats or Kipling poems that their parents had perhaps helped them pick out for this round. One by one, they were called up, until eventually it was my turn. I took to the podium. I opened my book. I began with the first line of the first chapter: "In Which We Are Introduced to Winnie-the-Pooh and Some Bees, and the Stories Begin." It is the chapter with the line "Then he climbed a little further … and a little further … and then just a little further."

And I won. It didn't bother me at all that no one else was particularly interested in winning this made-up prize. What mattered to me was that I'd won it on my own, reading something I loved, words of my choosing. I remember feeling at the time, as silly as it sounds, that somehow, by reading a children's book when everyone else was pretending to be an adult, I'd beaten the system. What system that was, I still don't know—this was just a diction competition for adolescents at a private school. But I held the feeling close.



Emil Sands, 2021. *Self-Portrait*. Oil on plastic.

There were few physical activities I actually could not attempt, but many I could not do well. I am thinking, in particular, of football—soccer. I tried to play when I was very young. Had I persevered, the necessity of using both legs would have proved helpful in rehabilitating my right side. But a concrete block descended if a ball was ever brought out at a friend's house or while on holiday. If a stray ball came off someone's foot in a park and I was expected to kick it back, I froze. I could not play. I did not play. I refused to play.

There was a power in saying no, but saying no also left me out. Every day at school, a lunchtime soccer game stretched across the fields outside. I took a different door—I began to go to the empty art studios. The studios were adjacent to the fields, and from my easel, I could see the game. Muffled shouts came my way. At a certain point, however, I began to look forward to my solitary lunchtime activity. The prospect of making new work and concentrating on something that mattered to me felt important. I started to think about going to art school and used the extra hour a day to create a portfolio.

As we reached the final year or two of school, the studios began to fill up a little. Two younger boys began editing their street photography in the computer suite. An art teacher inspired a group of classmates to come in every day and try screen printing. Although my school was only for boys in the earlier grades, it was coed in the final two years, and girls and boys could work in the studios together. My friend Sarah often sat across from me, drawing tiny floral patterns that, by the end of lunch, had ballooned out to fill the page. In the studios, on busy days, you couldn't hear the game outside at all.

Today, hardly anyone knows I am disabled. I tell no one, because I believe people will like me less. Maybe just for a split second. Maybe for longer. Or maybe I should rephrase: I believe people will like me more if they think I am like them. So I go out of my way to keep my disability private. When I am tired, a residue of my old limp returns. On the few, but truly excruciating, days that someone notices and asks if I have hurt my leg, I lie and say I twisted my ankle. *Oh shit, how?* And, demoralizing as it may be, I keep going—*on the stairs; last week in the shop; literally just before I saw*

you. On the rare occasions when I don't lie, I always wish that I had. *Wait, what? You're disabled?* The chasm opens again.

Read: On disability and accepting help

I go to the gym every day of the week. No one makes me do it—not because my cerebral palsy is gone, but because I am an adult. My body is a "good" body: It is strong, muscular in places, and tight-ish. It's not Marcus's, but I am not Marcus. In the gym, I am recognized, and men I've never spoken to nod their head my way.

Nevertheless, I am wary. Do they see that my right side is less muscular than my left? That I sometimes have trouble picking up the weights in a coordinated fashion? That, when I'm fatigued, I drop them just outside the little ridges I'm meant to leave them in? Do they think I'm weak because the weight I lift is low, to make up for my right side's deficiency? I want to tell them that all of these things are not my fault, but the fault of a rogue forceps blade 23 years ago. I want to show them my medical records, drag them to my gym bench, and point out everything that's wrong with my form, or my body, or my brain, because then I could stop second-guessing. I could own my condition. But I am not Achilles.

When my dad first overheard me lie about my limp, he was astonished. Within the family, my disability has become an easy, even joked-about, topic. We had a follow-up conversation in which he asked me why I had done that. Exasperated and embarrassed, I pretty much told him to back off. He did, but his eyes said enough: *This is not the son I raised.* And he was right. I know more than most that difference must be celebrated, and that each time I hide, the shame builds—for me, for others like me. Somehow, I have become the bully, or at least the bully's accomplice.

I am not sure I want to hide anymore. I'd rather embrace my disability than fear its fallout. But it would be a lie to say I love every part of my body. I am still grappling with the ways I have been made to feel that my body does not belong—and with the conviction that it is easier for everyone that I be a failing normal rather than a normal disabled.

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Fiction

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The Third Law of Magic

A short story

by Ben Okri



He spent the night making snow. He packed it tightly into balls of different sizes and stored them in the freezer to keep them stable.

For a long time, he had wanted to make something so simple and natural that no one would suspect concerted thinking had gone into it. He wanted the greatest possible concentration of thought along with the greatest possible efficiency in the execution of that thought.

He had come up with many ideas in the past. He would sell dirt. He would be a newspaper vendor, but the newspaper he sold would not exist. He would create one issue of the newspaper, make only 101 copies, and sell them. The stories in the newspaper would be outrageous, improbable, yet perfectly believable. He would insinuate, for example, that human beings were disappearing, and that more aliens existed among us than at any other time in history. The paper's events would make people doubt their reality or the reality of the society in which they lived. He would have an ad for a great dirt sale, giving the impression that people lined up every other week to buy dirt from different parts of the country. He would have another item about a 55-year-old flea, accompanied by a blown-up photograph, giving it a half-familiar, half-grotesque appearance, evoking both the art of William Blake and the largely credible pictures in *National Geographic*. But the more he considered such an elaborate scheme, the more he felt that its very elaborateness disqualified it from the true naturalness that authentic conception, raised to the status of art, must have.

He abandoned such baroque imaginings. He wanted something childlike. This made him think about childhood, about what's missing from it and how the city robs children of wonder. He wanted to be a dealer in wonders. But he wanted the wonders to be so ordinary that their very ordinariness would be inseparable from their power to astonish. He made a long list of the most ordinary things. He had done dirt. But dirt was not in itself wonderful. He had done flotsam, bottles, human hair. He had worked with the topography of body and skin, had imprinted the mythology of his color on paper. He had made his physical existence its own work of art. He had explored basketball and heights, had made art out of the dust of his favorite rough, urban streets. Using the detritus of society, he had explored the limits of the conceptual.

He now wanted something innocent. But the more you looked into that innocence, the more ambiguous and complex it became, until it encompassed everything he had been trying to say for most of his working life. Where was he going to find such a natural and transparent object? The

object had to defeat thought while endlessly stimulating it. But the object also had to be at the center of an event that could never be duplicated, that had happened only once—and then vanished—and whose occurrence would be a rumor. He wanted an event that everyone could enter, but that only a few people would experience at the time it happened. So many possibilities to be contained in a single, simple object.

For years now, he had been going to a part of the city where people sold the most unexpected things. He often wandered the market in search of materials that the streets had yielded. He had discovered that the refuse, the mountains of rubbish the city disposed of every day, was his most precious resource. It was more valuable to him than expensive works of art, created with expensive materials and costly assistants.

At the beginning of his wanderings, he was amazed by what people threw away. He had found perfectly functioning computers and television sets, radios and microwaves. He had unearthed paintings and posters from famous exhibitions, brochures from art galleries, papers from law firms, the complete 1922 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and books of every conceivable quality. He had rescued old Ornette Coleman records and an incomplete set of the tales of Chester Himes. He had uncovered maps and diaries and tap-dance shoes; evening dresses and top hats and a new pair of suspenders. He had found these among the garbage, the mess of decomposing vegetables and foul garnishes, the broken eggshells and the drool of yogurt and other mucuslike substances. He had dug out reams of government documentation about plans to restrict immigration, had marveled at the abandoned notes of a private detective and love letters that had been thrown away when that love had irrevocably died.

He had become a specialist in scouring the city's waste. He had a warehouse on the outskirts where he stored all that he found. On some evenings he went around with a large shopping cart stacked with everything he had collected. People always took him for a regular tramp, or for one of the mentally disturbed who ransacked trash cans and pushed their loaded carts around the city all night.

It was in the course of his wanderings that he had discovered this informal market where folks sold the most outlandish things. On his first visit, he was

astonished to find a lean, toothless man selling false teeth. Rows of them were laid out on a makeshift table. He had teeth for children and for women. He had a full row of dog and horse teeth. Next to him, another man sold eyepieces. On a table he displayed monocles and strange wire eyeglasses. He even had glass eyes. Some were large, some small, and almost all of them blue. Not far from him, a man sold oddly shaped mangoes from South America alongside huge, bulbous avocados. Behind him someone sold clothes for giants. Next to him, another sold baby shoes.

He watched them and went among them. He bought a glass eye and had a chat with the man who sold false teeth.

"What's your name?"

"Joe."

"How long you been here?"

"Today?"

"No, selling here."

"Couple of months."

"Sell well?"

"We do all right."

"I'm looking to sell stuff."

"Yeah, what d'you sell?"

"Dirt."

"Real dirt?"

"Real dirt."

"Hey, Nathan. Come over. This guy sells dirt."

Nathan came over. He was the one who sold baby shoes.

“You sell dirt?”

“Yeah. Where do you find your baby shoes?”

“In the bins. Where do you find your dirt?”

“In the streets.”

“Good one. You don’t have to rob no one for dirt, do you?”

“Guess not.”

“Come sell here,” said Joe, the false-teeth man.

“Yeah?”

“Every other Sunday. You just set yourself up and that’s it. You mind your business, we mind ours.”

“That simple, yeah?”

“That simple.”

“Great. I’ll come by.”

“Can’t wait to see your dirt.”

He went there every other Sunday for the next three months. He never sold anything; he just went to hang out with the oddball traders. He wore a coarse coat with an ascot and beat-up shoes. Half tramp, half jazzman. He could be either, depending on who was looking at him. He got used to the rough humor of the traders and they got used to his sly, elusive ways.

“When you going to start selling dirt?” said the false-teeth man.

“When the weather’s right.”

“There’s a blizzard coming. You better start collecting dirt now or you won’t be able to find it. You know how the city gets covered when it snows.”

If a gram of snow were the same price as a gram of gold, how much would it cost us to deck the city in splendor?

“Dirt man here’s got to find the right kind of dirt, yeah?” said baby shoes. “That must be hard.”

The traders laughed. He laughed wryly with them.

“Right kind of dirt is the hardest thing in the world to find. Harder than finding gold.”

“How hard can it be to find the right kind of dirt?” asked baby shoes.

“Takes the right kind of eyes. And that ain’t common.”

“It sure ain’t,” said baby shoes, and they all roared again with laughter.

Two days before the next market day, a thick blanket of snow covered the city, its cars and skyscrapers, its fields and lampposts. At home, he watched the snow coming down. He went for a walk and saw the city under a pall—under a spell—of whiteness. *What if snow were black?* he thought. *Now that would be something.* When snow fell, it would be like night raining down. The houses and the trees and the cars and the roads would be covered in blackness. They’d be singing of a black Christmas. They’d make black snowmen. It would create a different mythology. He mused on this as he wandered the city. The sidewalks were under sheets of snow. *Winter kept us warm.* He watched children in a nearby field throwing snowballs at one another. A fist-size snowball missed its target and whacked him in the chest. The kids were scared by what they’d done and ran off laughing and screaming, imagining that he was after them. He picked up the broken ball of snow and repacked it and took it home with him, still musing. *Covering Earth in forgetful snow.*

At home he made two phone calls. The people who received the calls were puzzled by his instructions. One was to bring a camera to a certain place at a certain time.

“Do not talk to me like you know me. Just take pictures. Be as inconspicuous as possible. Blend in. Don’t be like a goddamn tabloid photographer. You were just going past and you saw something that caught your eye and you took pictures of it and then you moved on.”

“Is that it?” said the photographer.

“Pretty much.”

“What’s it about?”

“You don’t need to know. Better if you don’t know. Just be there.”

And to the other caller he said:

“You free on that day?”

“Yeah, sure. What’s it about?”

“Just show up. Don’t act like you know me. Buy something. Stick around for a bit. Then move on.”

“Up to your stuff again?”

“Something like that.”

“One day you’re going to get into trouble pulling stunts.”

“If life ain’t trouble, what’s the point of it?”

They laughed and he put the phone down. He sat by the window and watched the snow falling. He tried to make out a single flake as it formed, and then he tried to follow the downward trajectory. The flakes were like cataracts falling over the eye. He watched the forms the snow made of the stationary cars. Some of them looked like giant hats in the street. He thought about snow: It’s all in there. All the contradiction’s in there. Is it one thing or another? Is it the sky’s fault that snow is white? The whiteness of the whale. How much should a snowflake cost? If nature were selling snow, how much would we need to spend to decorate the whole city with it, how much for the

bridal garment of the cathedral, how much for the mantle on the Statue of Liberty? If a gram of snow were the same price as a gram of gold, how much would it cost us to deck the city in splendor? Gone are the snows of yesteryear. Everyone has a memory of snow. Most enchanting thing in the world. The priceless marvel that falls without a sound. Stilling the city and making silence audible. Not the snowmen that melt and, before they vanish, turn ugly and lumpish; not the curves of snow on church domes and telegraph wires, but maybe the way the heart jumps with delight when you step out in the dark or in the morning into the soft miracle of its revelation as it changes the visible world into an innocent paradise that children love.

Can’t put a price on it. How do you put a price on that compression of the sky? Then it melts and is gone, an evanescent memory, fragile like beauty, leaving its midway state and returning to one of the primal elements. Too precious for art. Put it in an art gallery or a museum, and it makes no sense. Exposes the fraudulence of making and pricing. A little piece of transcendence and ephemerality, all in a little flake, the pollen of winter. What complexity is contained in it—commerce, class, race, design, spirituality, fragility, tenderness, childhood, nature, surprise, wonder. Neither ice nor water; part air, part dream. Spirit substance. Black kids in the snow. That indefinable happiness in which the history of the brutalization of bodies is dissolved. Snow equalizes the heart. Perhaps the only truly democratic thing in this divided republic. Life, liberty, and the perfection of snow.

The whiskey man stared at the rows of snowballs and blinked as if he were not seeing right and then staggered away.

He left the window.

“I got my next thing,” he said to his wife, in the bedroom.

“Yeah, what is it?”

“It’s going to happen and no one will see it. Then it will be a rumor. Then there will be these bits of evidence that it took place. Not a single curator, gallery owner, or museum director will be anywhere near it. Only kids and passersby, the poor, the simple, people who don’t look at art and don’t give a fuck what it is. It will be the most democratic show in the country. It will

take place under a bridge, near hoboes and dropouts, drug dealers and tramps. No one will know they are looking at it. Because it will be something so simple and ordinary that it will look like everything else, except for a few tiny details. Then it will be over, as if it had never happened.

“Afterwards, 20 times more people than were there will claim to have been there. What is nothing will become something, and it will become more something with the passing of years, as the event itself fades into oblivion and becomes either a myth or nothing. The years will pass and everything will become old, but this thing that may or may not have happened will become more real and at the same time more strange.

“I always wanted to do something that will work with the passing of time itself, and I think I’ve found a way. It’s going to be about everything and nothing. It’s going to be about whatever you want it to be about. And yet no one’s going to be able to lay a finger on it. It’ll be like snowflakes, evanescent; and like dreaming, persistent; and like a stone wall, tangible.”

The wife stuck her head out from the bedroom.

“How you going to do all that?”

But he didn’t reply, because he was watching the dance of snowflakes falling onto the black streets.



Days later, on a cold Sunday when the snow had stopped falling, people walking past the market under the bridge saw something they had never seen before. They saw the regular sellers of false teeth and baby shoes and clothes for giants. But they also saw a stall where snowballs were laid out on a Moroccan patterned rug of red and orange and blue. The larger ones were at the top, and in a descending scale of size, the smaller ones were lower down. The smallest ones were quite tiny, the size of a wren's egg, but perfectly white and perfectly round. The snowballs formed their own immaculate pattern against the Moroccan arabesques. At the back of the stall, hovering over the display, was a man in a dark-brown jacket and dark trousers, with a natty ascot and a rimless dark hat. At first glance he looked like a bum. But when you looked at him again, you noticed a certain secret care about his attire. He was talking to the false-teeth trader, and they seemed to be laughing lightly at some joke.

Many people went past and could not entirely compute what they were seeing. Some were not sure that they had seen what they had seen. They doubled back to get another look. Then they scratched their heads. A man with a whiskey bottle came by, saw the display, and stopped.

"You selling these?"

"It's why I'm here."

"But I could make these myself," said the man with the whiskey bottle.

"You think?"

The whiskey man stared at the rows of snowballs and blinked as if he were not seeing right and then staggered away. He paused at the false-teeth stall and bought a pair. Then he went off singing something that resembled a sea shanty.

A moment later another man came along, and when he saw the rows of snowballs, he began to laugh.

"Only in America," he said, between laughs. "You selling these for real?"

"For real."

“How much?”

The price of the snowballs rose with their size, he was told. The smallest was 50 cents and the largest was $1.

“A dollar for a snowball?”

“Cheap at the price.”

The man stared at the pristine rows of snowballs and then at the trader and back at the white rows. He sensed a profound incongruity between the whiteness of the snowballs and the haziness of the trader, but he couldn’t put his finger on what it was.

“You some kind of magician or something?”

“Got to be to stay alive, right?”

The prospective client laughed again. He couldn’t control his laughter. He found the whole setup funny but couldn’t say why. The trader watched him, his back against the wall of the run-down bridge.

“This is just the best jive I ever seen. If I buy one, it gon’ disappear or something?”

“You pay your money, you takes your chances,” the trader said.

The man lingered, unable to leave and unable to commit to a purchase.

“You into some kind of scam here and I just can’t see what it is. You sold any of these already?”

“I done all right,” came the reply.

While he hung around, a woman wheeling her son in a stroller saw the snowballs and stopped. The man sloped off.

“Can I have a snowball, Mommy?” the boy said.

“It depends on if this gentleman is selling them, honey,” she said to the air generally. But she maneuvered the stroller to the front of the stall and looked at the smiling face of the trader.

“That’s a bright boy you got there,” he said, not coming forward, his smile going on ahead.

“They are magic!” the boy said. “I want one. Can I have one, Mommy?”

“Are you selling these snowballs?”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“Did you make them yourself?”

“I think God did, but I lined them up.”

“So pretty. Never seen snowballs look so pretty before.”

“Can I have one, Mom?”

The trader came forward. He looked at the kid, who was sitting in his buggy like a little emperor. Then he said: “Which one would you like?”

“A small one. That one,” the boy said, pointing to the lower line of snowballs, to the tiny ones like wrens’ eggs. The man reached down and picked out the snowball indicated, as well as a big one from the top, and gave them to the boy, who breathed out a cry of wonder.

The man was still laughing in the distance and saying something about always reinventing the dream, brother.

At that moment, a camera clicked.

“They’re real, Mom. They’re real snowballs.”

“How much are those?” the mother asked.

“On the house, ma’am, on the house.”

“Oh, you are a gentleman.”

“I’m sure you’ll do the same thing for my kid.”

The woman, looking at the trader, reddened and was momentarily flustered. She wheeled the stroller around and began to walk away. But then she stopped and came back and stood gazing at the snowballs. The camera clicked again.

“They are just the prettiest things, and the rows of them are just so funny. Made my day, sir. You made my day.”

The trader nodded. Joe, seeing the interest around the snow stall, came over.

“Ma’am, can I interest you in a new set of teeth?”

But the transition from snowballs to false teeth was perhaps a little too bold for her, and she took off into the streets, looking back from time to time at the gleaming rows of snowballs on the patterned rug.

Many people stopped, drawn by the mysterious and orderly form of the snowballs at the stall. Some came to banter, some came to test their wits, some came with cracks about capitalism. Another man saw the perfect rows of whiteness and couldn’t stop laughing. He meant to ask a question about how much they cost, but something about the setup seemed so hilarious to him that he just laughed and laughed and came close to choking. The trader had to come around the stall and pat him on the back ’til he calmed down and wiped the tears of laughter from his cracked, life-beaten face. When he laughed, he showed no upper teeth, and false-teeth man sold him a set at a knockdown price. The man was still laughing in the distance and saying something about always reinventing the dream, brother.

Later, another man showed up. It seemed he was a lawyer from upstate and was in the big city for a conference. He had gone on a stroll and his feet had led him here; he took the snowball display very seriously and began haggling for the price of a middle-size ball. He was thinking of bringing it back home to his son, who he was sure would love it. Only he wanted to know if it would keep.

“Put it in a fridge soon as you get back to your hotel. They’re packed pretty tight so they’ll hold for a while, so long as you’re not planning a trip to the Mojave Desert,” said the snow trader.

The lawyer was very excited by this unusual purchase and took out his wallet.

“I knew you guys were pretty wacky in the city, but this is the wackiest thing I’ve seen in a long time.”

And all the while, the camera was clicking. No one really noticed the photographer, because he didn’t look the part. He blended in a short distance away and could be taken for a curious tourist, from the Middle East perhaps, someone overawed by the mesmerizing things the great city had to offer those with an eye for its quotidian oddities.

The seller of snowballs let his eyes wander over the city’s skyline. The rooftops were edged with snow. All of the boundaries were blurred. The snow linked things that seemed separate.

The lawyer went off, chuckling to himself, with his wrapped-up snowball. He didn’t look back to see that the rows of whiteness on the resplendent rug had almost magically replenished themselves, so that they were again a perfect pattern of serial globes. Young women came by in their winter coats and their mufflers and their impeccable gloves. They couldn’t stop giggling at the cuteness of the row of small snowballs. They looked at the trader shyly, and he asked where they were from and engaged them mildly and carefully, tossing at them the occasional mot juste, or a throwaway line with a salty turn of wit, which they didn’t quite catch. They debated among themselves whether the snowballs would make a perfect birthday present for a friend and speculated about his reaction. While they pondered, someone else came by who was surprised to see the seller of snowballs and began to let out a cry of astonishment. The strange, severe look on the trader’s face stopped him in his playfully caustic greeting.

“What’s up, brother?”

“Just go away, or behave like you don’t know me,” whispered the snow seller in a fierce undertone.

“Oh, all right, I get it,” said the newcomer, clearly an acquaintance.

But he didn’t leave, sensing intrigue and a story, sensing that, with his usual good timing and excellent luck, he had stumbled on something, maybe a scoop, maybe just a good old tale to tell the folks. And so he lingered and examined the serial snowball display with the gravity of a connoisseur, dwelling on each detail. He asked the women, who were still debating, if they had a magnifying glass. They said they didn’t and, giggling again, wandered away.

“This ain’t a museum,” the seller of snow said. “Move on, or I’m closing the stall.”

The old friend stood up.

“Okay, keep your stone hair on. I’ll push off, but that’s dinner you owe me.”

“Call you next week.”

“Can’t wait.”

He left, walking in a lopsided way, as if he were conscious of being watched, which he was, by the snowball seller. The old friend made a backward gesture, a half wave, before disappearing round a corner. The snow seller called to Joe.

“You got the time?”

Joe shouted it across.

“You thinking of packing up already?”

“I’ll give it another half hour.”

“Getting too hot for your snowballs?” Joe said, laughing and rubbing his palms together to warm them.

“Sometimes the wrong people show up.”

“Hazards of the trade, my man. The other day my ex-wife turned up. Offered to give her some of these here teeth instead of monthly maintenance. She didn’t want ’em.”

“Can’t say I blame her.”

“Put me right off my stride. Knocked the wind out of me, her turning up like that.”

“Like you say, hazards of the trade.”

“Ain’t that right.”

A beautiful young woman arrived and stood in front of the snowball stall. With a solemn expression, she studied the glistening rows of snowballs. She seemed mesmerized, lost in a faraway musing. The depth of her absorption made her look even more beautiful. She stood there silently for a long time. The camera clicked discreetly. The seller of snowballs did not interrupt the young lady’s musings. With a half smile, he looked away and took his mind off her. *Some things are just perfect if you let them be*, he thought. *Sometimes a moment is the ideal image of life. You couldn’t improve it if you had a thousand years.* The camera worked unobtrusively. The seller of snowballs let his eyes wander over the city’s skyline. The rooftops were edged with snow. All of the boundaries were blurred. The snow linked things that seemed separate. It was falling now, flakes in pirouettes, bringing silence. It was time to make the show disappear. *Our revels now are ended.* The real magic begins when things disappear. It begins with erasure, with absence. The snowfall was obliterating the city, anonymizing its uniqueness. But the true enchantment is when from death things begin to return, long after people knew of their existence. You have to get people to know that something once happened, that it once existed, before you can make them know that it can never happen again, that it is lost in time forever. Lost in time, but resurrected in myth, or rumor, or stories.

“Joe,” he said, “it’s been nice knowing you.”

"You make it sound like a valediction."

"For a man who sells false teeth, you sure got one hell of a vocabulary."

The young lady smiled, and asked how much the snowballs cost, just as he began dismantling the show.

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Dispatches

- **The GOP Is Just Obnoxious**
- **Big-Sky Country**

The GOP Is Just Obnoxious

It's why the party keeps losing elections.

by David Frum



This article was featured in One Story to Read Today, a newsletter in which our editors recommend a single must-read from The Atlantic*, Monday through Friday.* [*Sign up for it here.*]

Let’s say you’re a politician in a close race and your opponent suffers a stroke. What do you do?

If you are Mehmet Oz running as a Republican for the U.S. Senate in Pennsylvania, what you do is mock your opponent's affliction. In August, the Oz campaign released a list of "concessions" it would offer to the Democrat John Fetterman in a candidates' debate, including:

"We will allow John to have all of his notes in front of him along with an earpiece so he can have the answers given to him by his staff, in real time." And: "We will pay for any additional medical personnel he might need to have on standby."

Oz's derision of his opponent's medical condition continued right up until Oz lost the race by more than 250,000 votes. Oz's defeat flipped the Pennsylvania seat from Republican to Democrat, dooming GOP hopes of a Senate majority in 2023.

A growing number of Republicans are now pointing their finger at Donald Trump for the party's disappointments in the 2022 elections, with good reason. Trump elevated election denial as an issue and burdened his party with a lot of election-denying candidates—and voters decisively repudiated them.

But not all of Trump's picks were obviously bad. Oz was for years a successful TV pitchman, trusted by millions of Americans for health advice. The first Muslim nominated for a Senate run by a major party, he advanced Republican claims to represent 21st-century America. Oz got himself tangled up between competing positions on abortion, sometimes in consecutive sentences, precisely because he hoped to position himself as moderate on such issues.

But Oz's decision to campaign as a jerk hurt him. When his opponent got sick, Oz could have drawn on his own medical background for compassion and understanding. Before he succumbed to the allure of TV, Oz was an acclaimed doctor whose innovations transformed the treatment of heart disease. He could have reminded voters of his best human qualities rather than displaying his worst.

The choice to do the opposite was his, not Trump's.

Adam Serwer: The cruelty is the point

And Oz was not unique. Many of the unsuccessful Republican candidates in 2022 offered voters weird, extreme, or obnoxious personas. Among the worst was Blake Masters, a candidate for the U.S. Senate in Arizona. He released photos and campaign videos of himself playing with guns, looking like a sociopath. He lost by nearly five points. Trump endorsed Masters in the end, but Trump wasn't the one who initially selected or funded him. That unsavory distinction belongs to the tech billionaire and Republican donor Peter Thiel, who invested big and early in the campaign of his former university student.

Trump-led Republicans have now endured four bad elections in a row.

Performative trolling did not always lead to failure. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis indulged in obnoxious stunts in 2022. He promoted anti-vaccination conspiracy theorists. He used the power of government to punish corporations that dissented from his culture-war policies. He spent $1.5 million of taxpayer money to send asylum seekers to Martha's Vineyard.

But DeSantis was an incumbent executive with a record of accomplishment. Antics intended to enrapture the national Fox News audience could be offset by actions to satisfy his local electorate: restoring the Everglades, raising teacher pay, and reopening public schools early despite COVID risks.

DeSantis's many Republican supporters must now ponder: What happens when and if the governor takes his show on the road? "Pragmatic on state concerns, divisive on national issues!" plays a little differently in a presidential race than it does at the state level. But the early indications are that he's sticking with divisiveness: A month after his reelection, DeSantis is bidding for the anti-vax vote by promoting extremist allegations from the far fringes that modern vaccines threaten public health.

A generation ago, politicians invested great effort in appearing agreeable: Ronald Reagan's warm chuckle, Bill Clinton's down-home charm, George W. Bush's smiling affability. By contrast, Donald Trump delighted in name-calling, rudeness, and open disdain. Not even his supporters would have

described Trump as an agreeable person. Yet he made it to the White House all the same—in part *because of* this trollish style of politics, which has encouraged others to emulate him.

Ilana E. Strauss: How science explains why some politicians are jerks

Has our hyper-polarized era changed the old rules of politics? James Poniewozik's 2019 book, *Audience of One*, argues that Trump's ascendancy was the product of a huge shift in media culture. The three big television networks of yore had sought to create "the least objectionable program"; they aimed to make shows that would offend the fewest viewers. As audiences fractured, however, the marketplace rewarded content that excited ever narrower segments of American society. Reagan and Clinton were replaced by Trump for much the same reason Walter Cronkite was replaced by Sean Hannity.

It's an ingenious theory. But, as Poniewozik acknowledges, democratic politics in a two-party system remains an inescapably broadcast business. Trump's material sold well enough in 2016 to win (with help from FBI Director James Comey's intervention against Hillary Clinton, Russian hackers amplified by the Trump campaign, and the mechanics of the Electoral College). But in 2020, Trump met the political incarnation of the Least Objectionable Program: Joe Biden, who is to politics what Jay Leno was to late-night entertainment.

Trump-led Republicans have now endured four bad elections in a row. In 2018, they lost the House. In 2020, they lost the presidency. In 2021, they lost the Senate. In 2022, they won back the House—barely—but otherwise failed to score the gains one expects of the opposition party in a midterm. They suffered a net loss of one Senate seat and two governorships. They failed to flip a single chamber in any state legislature. In fact, the Democrats gained control of four: one each in Minnesota and Pennsylvania, and both in Michigan.

Plausible theories about why Republicans fared so badly in 2022 abound. The economy? Gas prices fell in the second half of 2022, while the economy continued to grow. Abortion? The Supreme Court struck down *Roe v. Wade* in June, and Republican officeholders began musing almost immediately

about a national ban, while draconian restrictions began spreading through the states. Attacks on democracy? In contest after contest, Republicans expressed their contempt for free elections, and independent voters responded by rejecting them.

America is a huge country full of decent people who are offended by bullying and cruelty.

All of these factors clearly played a role. But don't under-weight the impact of the performative obnoxiousness that now pervades Republican messaging. Conservatives have built career paths for young people that start on extremist message boards and lead to jobs on Republican campaigns, then jobs in state and federal offices, and then jobs in conservative media.

Former top Trump-administration officials set up a well-funded dark-money group, Citizens for Sanity, that spent millions to post trolling messages on local TV in battleground states, intended to annoy viewers into voting Republican, such as "Protect pregnant men from climate discrimination." The effect was just to make the Republicans seem juvenile.

In 2021, then–House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy posted a video of himself reading aloud from Dr. Seuss to protest the Seuss estate's withdrawing some works for being racially insensitive (although he took care to read *Green Eggs and Ham*, not one of the withdrawn books).

Trump himself often seemed to borrow his scripts from a Borscht Belt insult comic—for instance, performing imagined dialogues making fun of his opponent's adult children during the 2020 campaign.

This is not a "both sides" story. Democratic candidates don't try to energize their base by "owning the conservatives"; that's just not a phrase you hear. The Democratic coalition is bigger and looser than the Republican coalition, and it's not clear that Democrats even have an obvious "base" the way that Republicans do. The people who heeded Representative Jim Clyburn's endorsement of Joe Biden in South Carolina do not necessarily have much in common with those who knocked on doors for Senator Elizabeth Warren's presidential campaign. Trying to energize all of the Democratic Party's many different "bases" with deliberate offensiveness against perceived

cultural adversaries would likely fizzle at best, and backfire at worst. On the Republican side, however, the politics of performance can be—or seem—rewarding, at least in the short run.

This pattern of behavior bids fair to repeat itself in 2024. As I write these words at the beginning of 2023, the conservative world is most excited not by the prospect of big legislative action from a Republican House majority, and not by Trump's declared candidacy for president in 2024 or by DeSantis's as-yet-undeclared one, but by the chance to repeat its 2020 attacks on the personal misconduct of President Biden's son Hunter.

In the summer of 2019, the Trump administration put enormous pressure on the newly elected Zelensky administration in Ukraine to announce some kind of criminal investigation of the Biden family. This first round of Trump's project to manufacture an anti-Biden scandal exploded into Trump's first impeachment.

The failure of round one did not deter the Trump campaign. It tried again in 2020. This time, the scandal project was based on sexually explicit photographs and putatively compromising emails featuring Hunter Biden. The story the Trump campaign told about how it obtained these materials sounded dubious: Hunter Biden himself supposedly delivered his computer to a legally blind repairman in Delaware but never returned to retrieve it—so the repairman tracked down Rudy Giuliani and handed over a copy of the hard drive. The repairman had also previously given the laptop itself to the FBI. Far-fetched stories can sometimes prove true, and so might this one.

Whatever the origin of the Hunter Biden materials, the authenticity of at least some of which has been confirmed by reputable media outlets, there's no dispute about their impact on the 2020 election. They flopped.

Pro-Trump Republicans could never accept that their go-to tactic had this time failed. Somebody or something else had to be to blame. They decided that this somebody or something was Twitter, which had briefly blocked links to the initial *New York Post* story on the laptop and its contents.

So now the new Twitter—and Elon Musk allies who have been offered privileged access to the company's internal workings—is trying again to

elevate the Hunter Biden laptop controversy, and to allege a cover-up involving the press, tech companies, and the national-security establishment. It's all very exciting to the tiny minority of Americans who closely follow political schemes. And it's all pushing conservatives and Republicans back onto the same doomed path they followed in the Trump years: stunts and memes and insults and fabricated controversies in place of practical solutions to the real problems everyday people face. The party has lost contact with the sensibility of mainstream America, a huge country full of decent people who are offended by bullying and cruelty.

There's talk of some kind of review by the Republican National Committee of what went wrong in 2022. If it happens, it will likely focus on organization, fundraising, and technology. For any political operation, there is always room to improve in these areas. But if the party is to thrive in the post-Trump era, it needs to start with something more basic: at least pretend to be nice.

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Big-Sky Country

Photographs that capture traces of American industry, class divides, and westward expansion

by Sarah Yager



Children at the Gildford Hutterite colony

In 2005, the photographer Christopher Churchill visited a Hutterite colony on the Montana Hi-Line, a sparsely populated stretch of prairie along the

Canadian border. He was traveling the United States for a project about faith, hoping to find commonalities among divergent beliefs. But as he spent time in the small religious community, surrounded by endless wheat fields and tracks that once formed the main line of the Great Northern Railway, he soon became interested in another American belief system: capitalism. Churchill was struck by the way commerce had shaped even this isolated landscape—and also by how the colony, in which members live and work together and share the proceeds of their labor, offered an alternative view of prosperity.









Top: A church in Inverness, population 77, flanked by power lines and grain bins. *Middle left*: Near railroad tracks in Butte, Montana, Churchill stumbled across a bare-knuckle boxing match. *Middle right*: A boy holds a longboard in Ennis, a town established during the Montana gold rush that is now a gateway for tourists visiting Yellowstone National Park. *Bottom*: A Hutterite boy in Gildford.

The experience got Churchill thinking about how individual lives intersect with broader economic forces. It became the inspiration for a new project, focused on "the American dream," that brought him back to Montana last summer. The resulting photographs, some shot in black-and-white and some in color, contain traces of American industry, class divides, and westward expansion: power lines interrupting the horizon, the glint of a belt buckle, the wind blowing through a reservation town. But the people Churchill met in brief encounters on his drive across the state take the foreground.





Top left: A woman sits on her front porch in Anaconda, just down the street from the grand town library—a gift from Phoebe Hearst, whose husband invested in the copper industry, which brought entrepreneurs rushing to the state until the mines went bust. *Top right*: Two brothers lean against a pickup at the Last Chance Stampede and Fair in Helena, before going to the 4-H livestock sale there. *Bottom left*: A young father holds his baby on the Blackfeet Reservation. *Bottom right*: A Hutterite woman in Gildford.

There is something precarious in these images, yet also defiant. A toughness and a tenderness. Churchill's subjects look directly into the camera, their expression demanding interpretation. This elusiveness offers its own revelation: A dream, after all, is a matter of one's own perception. Hutterite children bounce on a trampoline, their long skirts floating against the open sky. The girl in the center seems to smile, suspended in mid-air. It is impossible to know whether she is going up or down.



Hay bales near Great Falls, Montana

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Culture & Critics

- A New Way to Read Gatsby
- The Miraculous Salman Rushdie
- Did George Washington Burn New York?
- The Masterpiece No One Wanted to Save

A New Way to Read Gatsby

F. Scott Fitzgerald never explicitly states Jay Gatsby’s race.

by Alonzo Vereen



Of all the books in the 10th-grade curriculum, the class set of *The Great Gatsby* was what we teachers most coveted. Short enough to cover in one quarter, F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel was also packed with symbolism—Dr. Eckleburg's eyes on the billboard, the green light at the end of the dock, the

cars, the music. And it was weighty enough to support multiple readings. I imagined my first year of teaching bursting with rich discussions. But to start any conversation, I had to secure the books before the other teachers got them.

I succeeded, only to be deflated: My students fought *Gatsby* from the beginning. The teenagers in my classroom—all children of color living in an impoverished rural community in South Florida, many of them first-generation Americans whose parents had come from Haiti, Cuba, Mexico, or Guatemala—simply did not understand a majority of the words on the page. Any appeal I made to the sheer pleasures of the text fell flat. "Surely," I'd say with as much enthusiasm as possible, "you think this part is funny!" And I'd launch into a reading of Nick Carraway's opening narration: "Frequently I have feigned sleep, preoccupation, or a hostile levity when I realized by some unmistakable sign that an intimate revelation was quivering on the horizon." Silence. Eventually, one brave soul would raise a hand. "What's 'feigned'?"

More advanced readings, I realized, would have to be tabled. I shouldn't have been shocked. I, too, had struggled with *Gatsby* when I first read the book—and I had been a junior in college. Fitzgerald's coupling of lyrical passages with a minimalist plot, full of fits and starts, proved too great a challenge for me. Like my students, I hadn't been prepared by my public education for such a text. (One of my high-school teachers read *Roots* aloud to us for 45 minutes each class period—we made it through all 888 pages.) Stymied by the structure and language of *Gatsby*, I couldn't get a handle on the characters either. If I hoped to pass my upper-level literature course, I needed to find a way in.

If the race of an American character is not specified, we assume the character is white.

I turned to the secondary literature and found a chapter that offered an unexpected perspective on Gatsby's race in a 2004 book titled *The Tragic Black Buck: Racial Masquerading in the American Literary Imagination*. In it, Carlyle Van Thompson, a professor of African American and American literature at Medgar Evers College, argues that Fitzgerald "guilefully characterizes Jay Gatsby as a 'pale' Black individual who passes for white."

I read this sentence twice, feeling like I had finally been granted license to enter the novel, to see myself in it, to make my way through the prose and develop my own interpretations. I was a 20-year-old English major, concentrating in African American literature at a historically Black college, and I *still* needed that permission.

Read: To its earliest reviewers, *Gatsby* was anything but great

In America, we are taught that canonical literature foregrounds the experiences of white people. Rarely do we question the racial identities of Nathaniel Hawthorne's characters, or Herman Melville's, or Willa Cather's. If the race of an American character is not specified, we assume the character is white. This is especially true in reading older texts, but we do the same with contemporary ones. Take Celeste Ng's best-selling 2017 novel, *Little Fires Everywhere*, which revolves around the lives of two American mothers. Ng, an Asian American author, makes clear that Elena Richardson, one of the mothers, is white. Ng says nothing about the race of the other, Mia Warren, leaving many readers to imagine her, too, as white. In the adaptation of the novel for the small screen, the casting of Kerry Washington, a Black woman, as Mia delivered a jolt, adding a new dimension to the series that Ng welcomed. Toni Morrison challenged our imaginative assumptions in a different way. In "Recitatif," the only short story she wrote, her goal was to expose the binary expectations that most American readers bring to texts—and to confound them. As she revealed in her critical study *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, the story was "an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial."

Stumbling on Thompson's analysis of *The Great Gatsby* was like finding a door propped open, and I rushed through with questions. What if the novel's focus on class and ethnic tensions obscures a racial drama that readers have read right over? Early in the novel, Tom Buchanan's eugenicist warning to "look out" or "the white race will be ... utterly submerged" is loud and clear. Thompson's claim, by contrast, requires careful scrutiny of the text. He sets out to prove that a Black person is skillfully placed in the novel's foreground. Preoccupied with the obvious clash between old money and new money, we just haven't seen him, or the threat of miscegenation he

represents. Fitzgerald was wrestling with the idea of America as a place of self-making, where radical reinvention is at once celebrated and feared. In doing so, according to Thompson, he struck upon the most illusory of American self-transformations—Black passing as white—revealing "how intrinsically American literature and the American Dream are racial."

Thompson's interpretation—picking up on Morrison's call, in *Playing in the Dark*, to recognize an "Africanist presence" at the center of the nation's 19th- and 20th-century literary canon, a presence that serves as a foil for ideas of whiteness, freedom, and more—sent me back to *Gatsby*, this time to meet with an intellectually charged experience. To read the novel without presupposing any character's whiteness is to discover which characters are identified as white and which are not. As I searched for any possible references to Black or brown characters passing as white, eager to assess the racial ambiguities that Thompson finds so telling, I was alert for more clues than his chapter supplies. Nick Carraway, the first-person narrator, is of Scottish descent. His maid's Finnish identity is referenced seven times in the novel. Meyer Wolfsheim is a "small, flat-nosed Jew." Tom Buchanan, a self-identified Nordic, includes Nick as a fellow member of the master race. But as Thompson notes, he pauses before adding Daisy Buchanan—Nick's second cousin "once removed"—to the list, and then interrupts her when she begins to describe her "white girlhood." "Don't believe everything you hear," Tom tells Nick.

Read: How *The Great Gatsby* explains Trump

Jordan Baker, Daisy's best friend and Nick's love interest, makes it onto the Nordic list. Yet I noted that she is given a "slender golden arm," a "brown hand," "grey sun-strained eyes," "fingers, powdered white over their tan," and a "face the same brown tint as the fingerless glove on her knee." One explanation for these colorful adjectives could be that Jordan is a competitive golfer—tans are common in the profession. The use of "powdered white," though, gave me pause; so did the fact that Jordan is never reliably identified as white. Nick's assessment of her, even during their fling, is biting: "She was incurably dishonest. She wasn't able to endure being at a disadvantage and, given this unwillingness, I suppose she had begun dealing in subterfuges when she was very young." Could it be

that she and Daisy get along so well because they're both women at the turn of the 20th century who might very well be passing?

Thompson trains his focus on Jay Gatsby, flagging what he sees as telltale physical traits—his "brown, hardening body," in Fitzgerald's words, and hair that "looked as though it were trimmed every day." Thompson also has his eye out for an array of culturally evocative signals that "Gatsby is racially counterfeit." Nick, for example, is struck by his "graceful, conservative foxtrot," a dance modeled on the slow drag, a Black dance sensation of the period. He also notes that Gatsby's mansion sits on 40 acres of land in West Egg, an allotment that has a particular valence for Black Americans.

Thompson gathers less subtle pieces of evidence too. When, at the Plaza Hotel, Tom lets loose his suspicion that Daisy is having an affair with Gatsby, he frames it this way: "I suppose the latest thing is to sit back and let Mr. Nobody from Nowhere make love to your wife … Next they'll throw everything overboard and have intermarriage between black and white." To this, Jordan, the "incurably dishonest" one, responds, "We're all white here."

I couldn't, and still can't, endorse the confident assertion that Jay Gatsby is Black. What I do claim is that Jay Gatsby is unraced.

And what is one to make of the insinuation that Tom hurls at Gatsby in the heat of his anger upon learning of Daisy's infidelity? "I'll be damned if I see how you got within a mile of [Daisy] unless you brought the groceries to the back door." Throughout the scene, Fitzgerald emphasizes that Tom is "incredulous and insulting," impatient, sharp, and explosive. To be sure, Tom's fury might be expected, regardless of Gatsby's identity. But, combined with Tom's possibly veiled racial observations, could the outbursts suggest that something more is at stake than his marriage and social standing among the old-money elite? Could Tom here be venting his fears about miscegenation?

Of course, not everyone buys the Black Gatsby reading. Matthew J. Bruccoli, the editor of *F. Scott Fitzgerald's* The Great Gatsby*: A Literary Reference*, perhaps the most comprehensive study of the novel, dismissed the idea when he heard about Thompson's interpretation: "If Fitzgerald wanted to write about Blacks … he would have made it perfectly clear in

April 1925." Perhaps. But if Fitzgerald intended to write simply about white people, why did he plant so many cryptic descriptions? A scion of the Scribner family, whose firm published the novel, said the reading wasn't supported by any correspondence between Fitzgerald and his editor, Max Perkins. Yet Janet Savage, in *Jay Gatsby: A Black Man in Whiteface* (2017), explains that the initial title for the novel—*Trimalchio in West Egg*—refers to the former slave in Petronius's novel, *The Satyricon*. Upon gaining freedom and wealth, Trimalchio throws lavish parties. Though Fitzgerald chose another title at Perkins's request, the link between Gatsby and Trimalchio remains. When Gatsby finally reconnects with Daisy, he has no need to keep hosting big parties. "His career as Trimalchio," Nick observes, "was over."

Thompson himself said, after delivering the paper that inspired *The Tragic Black Buck*, that his students weren't all prompt converts to his view, and in the end, I couldn't, and still can't, endorse his confident assertion that Jay Gatsby is Black. What I do claim is that Jay Gatsby is unraced. And that seems to me more important, because it opens the door wider than stark revisionism does. The ambiguity of Gatsby's race and ethnicity shatters the Black-and-white framework we reflexively impose on so many classic texts.

This reading of *Gatsby*, I went on to discover when I scratched my initial lesson plan and started over, certainly gave my diverse class a way in. Gatsby's American identity is so ambiguous that the students could layer on top of it any ethnic or racial identity they brought to the novel. When they did, the text was freshly lit. This was the fall of 2012, and the Baz Luhrmann film adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, with a score produced by Jay-Z, had not yet been released. But the trailer was available, and I projected it onto my whiteboard. The students, immediately recognizing Jay-Z and Kanye West's song "No Church in the Wild," sat up. When Gatsby finally appeared, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, I paused it.

"Why is Gatsby white?" I asked them.

"Because that's what the book says," they answered, in near unison.

"Does it?" I asked, pretending to be confused.

Suddenly they were invested. They began scouring the novel for evidence of Gatsby's race. They were forced to look up words they didn't know, in the hope that those words would yield more clues. The students parsed intricate sentences down to their essence to extrapolate a clear meaning. And soon they began probing for deeper interpretations.

The conversation then, and in classes since, took off. "What about the two eggs?" students have asked, referring to Fitzgerald's description of East and West Egg. "Could they represent Black and white people?" They've pointed to Daisy's upbringing in Louisville, Kentucky, and wondered, "What about this section on Daisy's past? Could all this whiteness point to what Gatsby was really after? Is whiteness what he wanted to capture?" They delved more deeply into *The Great Gatsby* than they did into any other text I taught during those years—more deeply, according to some, than they did into any book in any school year. In sifting through pages and pages of textual evidence, they found room for themselves in one of America's greatest novels—indeed, in American culture.

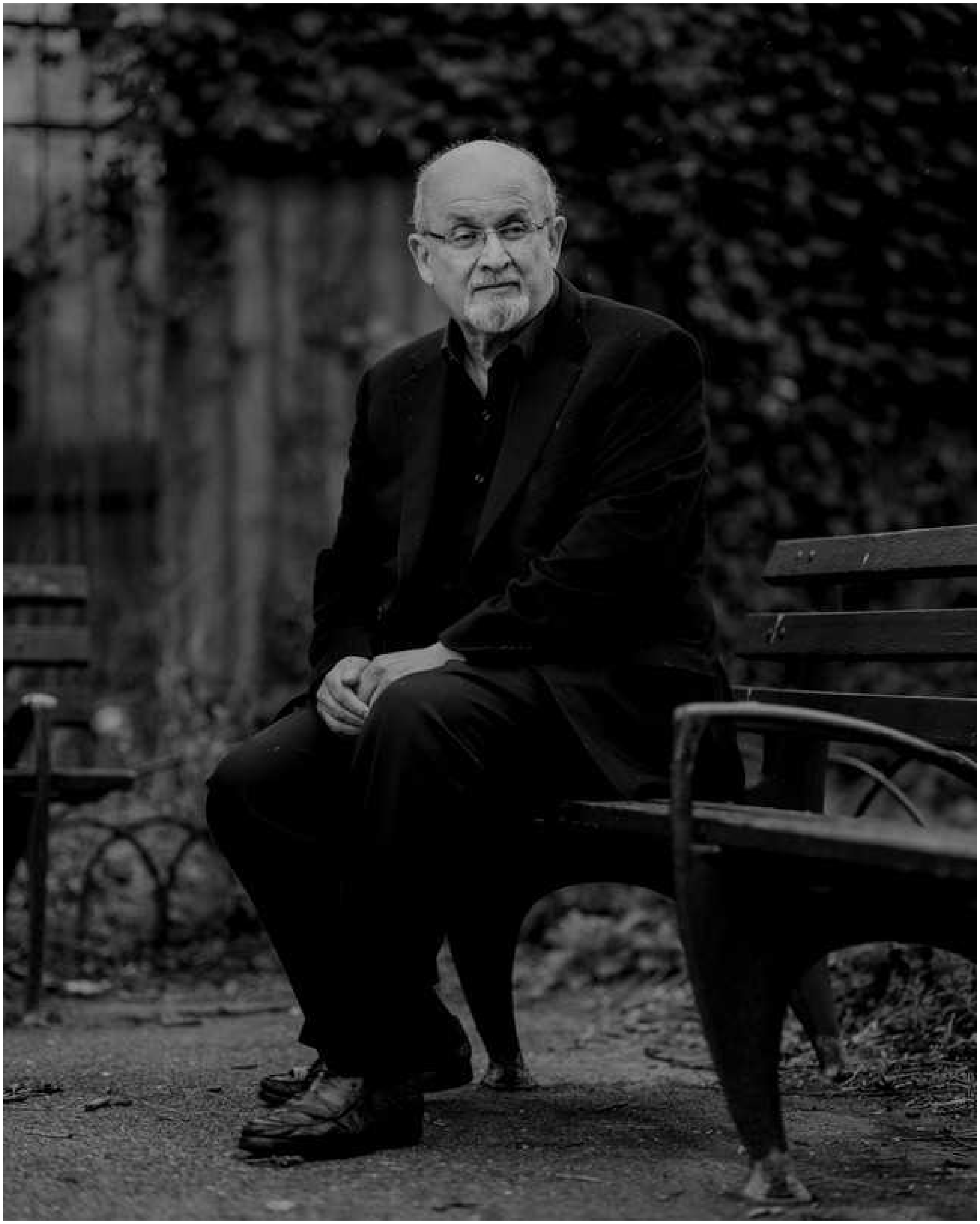
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The Miraculous Salman Rushdie

His enchanting new novel is a triumph.

by Judith Shulevitz



Salman Rushdie, April 2021 (Benedict Evans / August)

Salman Rushdie's new novel, *Victory City*, purports to be the summary of a long-lost, 24,000-verse epic poem from 14th-century India. The hero and

author of the poem is Pampa Kampana, who as a girl becomes the conduit for a goddess, channeling her oracular pronouncements and wielding her magical powers. She later causes a city to rise overnight from enchanted seeds, presides as its queen, and lives to the age of 247. The city she founds becomes a utopia—a feminist one, I'm tempted to say, because in its heyday women are equal to men. But really, when women flourish, everyone flourishes: male and female, native and foreigner, Muslim and Buddhist and Jain, gay and straight and bisexual. This liberal Xanadu goes on to become a great kingdom and turns distinctly illiberal. Pampa is forced to flee and hide.

The novel is titled *Victory City* not so much because that's the city's name—though briefly called that (Vijayanagar), it was soon rechristened Bisnaga—or because Pampa emerges victorious. She does not. The title comes from the last passage of her poem, written at the end of her centuries-long life. Casting her mind back over the rise and fall of her empire, she asks how its kings and queens will be remembered. Only through words, she answers—her words:

> While they lived, they were victors, or vanquished, or both.
> Now they are neither.
> Words are the only victors.

Just by dint of ending up in our hands, *Victory City* vindicates Pampa's bittersweet faith in literature. In a sense, that's true of everything Rushdie has published since 1989, when he went into hiding after Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the supreme leader of Iran, issued a fatwa, a religious ruling, in this case condemning Rushdie to death. His books could so easily not have been written. But *Victory City* is especially precious. For one thing, it comes out a mere six months after a self-avowed admirer of Khomeini finally got to Rushdie, assaulting him on a stage and stabbing him repeatedly in the neck and torso. Rushdie lost the use of an eye and a hand. He may have still been working on this novel; he may have finished it already. Readers will easily spot general parallels between our hero and her creator—both are prolific world-builders; both must elude political assassination—but a few of them seem to reproduce with eerie specificity the events of the summer. We don't know whether he added those afterward or life imitated fiction, as it sometimes does. It doesn't matter. What's important is that *Victory City* is a

triumph—not because it exists, but because it is utterly enchanting. Words are the only victors.

From the September 1981 issue: "The Prophet's Hair," a short story by Salman Rushdie

If this somber backstory makes you think that the novel is a slog, I've misled you. *Victory City* is a cheerful little vessel, despite its ultimate destination. Its myths of origin are recounted with glee. The day Bisnaga is created, its newly minted inhabitants are found asleep in the street, or wandering like sleepwalkers, or rolling on the ground in a state of confusion, beshitting themselves. Pampa whispers words that reach their ears and fill their minds with fictional ancestors, made-up memories, and notions of how to behave. By the following day, the adults are acting like adults and the children are running around as children should. Out of chaos has come something very like a nation: "It was as if everyone had lived here for years," Rushdie writes, and had "formed a long-established community, a city of love and death, tears and laughter, loyalty and betrayal, and everything else that human nature contains."

Rushdie plays adroitly with the metafictional and political implications of "real" people and a "real" polity being created out of imaginary backstories. (The image brings to mind a line from Benedict Anderson's great treatise on nationalism, *Imagined Communities*: "It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny.") But not to worry. These big ideas bob along on the novel's buoyant tone. That is set by two former cowherds, Hukka and Bukka, who hail from a town named Gooty. Fresh from a stint of inept soldiering and inspired by word of Pampa's great beauty, they show up at her door bearing a bag of seeds, among other gifts. She casts a spell on the seeds and sends the young men out to sow them. Stunned to see the city materialize, Hukka and Bukka decide that one of them should be its king and the other the king in waiting. That they're the right men for the jobs is not immediately evident.

Victory City is a cheerful little vessel, despite its ultimate destination.

"We must become gods now," Hukka says. "There, you see," he says, pointing. "There is our father, the Moon." Oh, cut it out, Bukka says. "We'll

never get away with that." A little later, it's Bukka's turn to essay great thoughts. "What is a human being?" he ventures. Did we start out as seeds? Or vegetables? Or "cows who lost our udders and two of our legs"? Frankly, he says, "I'm finding the vegetable possibility the most upsetting. I don't want to discover that my great-grandfather was a brinjal, or a pea."

Soon enough, they've moved on to the topic of who will be king first.

> "Well," Bukka said, hopefully, "I'm the smartest."
>
> "That's debatable," Hukka said. "However, I'm the oldest."
>
> "And I'm the most likable."
>
> "Again, debatable. But I repeat: I'm the oldest."
>
> "Yes, you're old. But I'm the most dynamic."
>
> "Dynamic isn't the same thing as regal," Hukka said. "And I'm still the oldest."

If their shtick sounds familiar, that's because Hukka and Bukka descend from a noble line of squabbling clowns. They're the heirs of the Marx Brothers bumbling around Freedonia; Abbott and Costello debating who's on first; *The Lion King*'s Timon and Pumbaa arguing over which bugs taste best. You can't read this novel without having classic movies on the brain. Film references are everywhere. Hukka insults his and Bukka's no-good, thieving brothers, Pukka, Chukka, and Dev, who have come to mooch off their siblings, in phrases that echo the curses a French soldier hurls at King Arthur and his knights in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* ("Empty-headed animal-food trough water! I fart in your general direction! Your mother was a hamster, and your father smelt of elderberries!"). The nefarious brothers are "dark princes, shadow lords, phantoms of the blood," Hukka says while the trio stands in front of him and Bukka. "They are stale bread. They are rotting fruit. They are moons in eclipse."

Hukka and Bukka's buffoonery helps turn *Victory City* into one of the most charming of Rushdie's wonder tales, his excursions into *Arabian Nights*–

style fantasia, a category that includes such novels as *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990) and *The Enchantress of Florence* (2008). *Victory City* takes on the issues the novelist has addressed throughout his career: the truthfulness of fiction and the scourges of religious orthodoxy and sanctimony, as well as colonialism, capitalism, fanaticism, and all other isms that in Rushdie's view are antithetical to the joyous multifariousness he treasures. To this rogues' gallery, *Victory City* adds patriarchy—and handles it, too, with a light touch.

Rushdie's comedies aren't always this effervescent. Some of them—I count *The Satanic Verses* among them—have felt strained and overstuffed. They're zany, which is not the same as funny. Clause is heaped upon clause in 10-car pileups of verbosity. The satire gets lost in the jumble. *Victory City*, however, sticks to the folk spirit of fairy tale. That is not to say the prose is simple. Rushdie's narration is always polyphonic, but here the hubbub is muted. You have to listen for the shifts in register. The narrator seems to slip into different personas, each with its own vocabulary and speech patterns: a pontificating elder, say, followed by a sarcastic wit.

Rushdie's protagonists also have a hard time staying in character. They try valiantly to stick to the orotund locution of myth and legend but keep lapsing into the vernacular, as if the heroic mode irritated their skin and had to be shrugged off. When Hukka proposes to Pampa, she replies, as though from on high, "There are things that must be done that are important for the general good … I will accept your hand to establish the bloodline of the empire." Hukka, hurt, starts to berate her, and his face erupts in spots. She bursts out laughing: "Suppurating zits, good gracious." It's very prepubescent of me, but one of my favorite lines turns on nothing more than the incongruous use of bad language. A man pauses before an enchanted forest, afraid that its presiding goddess will kill him if he ventures in. Finally, he makes a decision: "Okay … Fuck it. I'll stay."

The playful language, though, doesn't obscure the seriousness of the politics. This is a novel about backlash—the kind now cresting in America and abroad, and the kind found throughout history whenever despots feel threatened by the flowering of liberty. Here are some of the freedoms and pleasures opposed by the often cadaverous malefactors of the novel: worshipping the wrong god, women enjoying the same rights as men, sexual

diversity, the mixing of faiths and cultures, dissent, poetry, art. “The thugs of the discarded power structure didn’t give up easily,” the narrator observes at one point.

Graeme Wood: Salman Rushdie and the cult of offense

Victory City begins with a damning picture of the life—and death—of women under the old power structure. Pampa’s mother drops her child’s hand to walk into a funeral pyre, joining a mass suicide of women, mostly wives whose husbands were recently slaughtered in a senseless battle. Pampa’s mother, widowed years earlier, falls prey to the collective frenzy of female self-immolation. The abandoned child swears she will “turn her face toward life” and carry on until she is “impossibly, defiantly old.” This is the moment when the thundering voice of the goddess issues from her mouth. “You will fight to make sure that no more women are ever burned in this fashion, and that men start considering women in new ways,” the goddess decrees. “And you will live just long enough to witness both your success and your failure.”

Pampa’s life is definitely long enough to see both the realization of her and the goddess’s ambitions and all that follows. When she whispered Bisnaga into being, she gave the women professional identities they couldn’t dream of having anywhere else, certainly in the 14th century. They are lawyers, police officers, scribes, dentists, and soldiers. They guard the palace wearing golden breastplates; when they play drums in the square, men dance to them. While egalitarianism reigns, the city thrives; its coffers are said to be overflowing.

If I were into numerology, I’d attribute significance to the fact that if you subtract Pampa’s life span (247 years) from the present year, 2023, you get 1776, which suggests another nation conceived in liberty. America’s lapses do seem to be on Rushdie’s mind. Much later, after Bisnaga has come under corrupt, theocratic rule, the narrator observes that its people have “little regard for yesterdays.” They live wholly in the present. “This made Bisnaga a dynamic place, capable of immense forward-looking energy, but also a place that suffered from the problem of all amnesiacs,” Rushdie writes, “which was that to turn away from history was to make possible a cyclical

repetition of its crimes." This could describe any number of evolving countries, of course, but echoes a familiar critique of the United States.

Pampa, meanwhile, is a woman of the future who does not forget the past. She is thrillingly brazen, not just by the standards of her day but also by ours. Her audacity amounts to an authorial nudge, bidding us to remember that we, too, can be prudish. Pampa agrees to marry Hukka only on the condition that she be allowed to keep her lover, a Portuguese horse trader whose eyes are "the green of the grass at dawn" and whose hair is "the red of the sun as it set." Hukka agrees to this unconventional arrangement because her power and beauty drive him mad with lust: "You are so unbelievably dangerous," he says feverishly. Pampa should have realized that this love language of Hukka's was also a warning.

Salman Rushdie is often called a magical realist. I think a better term is fabulist, in the literal sense of the word. His novels are fables, stories featuring magical humans and other creatures who teach little, and big, lessons. There are two ways to write didactic fiction: with a straight face or playing it for laughs. Rushdie has always gone for the laughs, embellishing his morality plays with vaudevillian flourishes. In *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, which he wrote for his son, the villains wear long black cloaks and carry hidden daggers. It's a cloak-and-dagger joke, of course, but its adult audience may have read into it something else as well. *Haroun* came out in 1990, the year after the fatwa was issued. The black-robed Khomeini claimed that Rushdie's brashly profane *Satanic Verses* was an insult to "the sacred beliefs of Muslims" (Rushdie's theory is that the imam wanted to rally his followers after the ruinous Iran-Iraq War). Screaming mobs had demanded that the book be banned. In *Haroun*, the bad guys have outlawed speech itself; the head bad guy is "the Arch-Enemy of all Stories," "the Prince of Silence," and "the Foe of Speech."

One of the lesser vicissitudes of becoming world-famous as the object of an international murder plot rather than as a novelist is that your work will always be read as an allegory of your life. I don't think I'm overindulging in this biographical fallacy, though, if I say that Rushdie's frothy comedies are also very dark. Even the happy ending of a children's book like *Haroun* feels Brechtian. Sudden rescues after an implausible series of events underscore

the blunt truth that good isn't guaranteed to triumph. On the contrary: The odds are usually against it.

Randy Boyagoda: To support Salman Rushdie, just read him

Bisnaga founders because Pampa's personal liberties engender a political crisis. Her marriage to Hukka is unhappy. Her daughters have reddish hair and green eyes, and Hukka grows sulky. In his gloom, he comes under the sway of a particularly unpleasant priest, Vidyasagar, the leader of a puritanical "New Religion," who aims to correct what he considers Bisnaga's moral laxity. Vidyasagar and Pampa have history, too: When she was a child, he took her in, only to sexually abuse her for years. Now Vidyasagar becomes Hukka's chief adviser, but luckily, Hukka dies before the two of them can outlaw everything with life in it. Bukka ascends to the throne. He's open-minded and jolly. Pampa's horse-trader paramour has died, and she marries Bukka for love; he's happy to let Pampa put up erotic friezes all over the city. Theirs is the first golden age of Bisnaga.

Rushdie's general shenanigans are parts of a whole, a commedia dell'arte performance drawing on his personal suffering, but also on the great dramas of our time.

But golden ages don't last, and as everyone knows, utopias and magic kingdoms rarely survive generational transitions of power. The dour ascetic gains an ever larger following. The queen refuses to compromise her principles. Pampa demands that her daughters, who have grown up to be gracious and wise, claim the right of succession to the throne, rather than the younger, brutish sons she had with Bukka. He complies and banishes them, reluctantly. Riots break out in the city, which is growing more intolerant. Pampa tries to whisper the people back to reason, but they're less inclined to listen than they used to be. "It may just be," Rushdie has Bukka observe, in a wink to the reader, "that your ideas are too progressive for the fourteenth century." The gears of the city's and Pampa's downfall creak into motion.

Rushdie knows a lot—too much—about backlashes and their horrors. It would be easy to read the antics of his post-fatwa novels as pure defiance: If he stops playing the jester, the terrorists win. There's some truth to that, and in the face of a deadly threat that curtailed his freedom of movement for

more than three decades, his staunch drollery has been remarkable. But he was a clown from the beginning. His verbal excess, his vamping, his characters' exaggerated traits—his general shenanigans—are parts of a whole, a commedia dell'arte performance drawing on his personal suffering, yes, but also on the great dramas of our time, in which he played a role only because he was forced to. Chief among these dramas, for Rushdie, are the struggle between authoritarianism and noisy, messy democracy, and the efforts of the humorless and hierarchical to quash irreverence and equality. No matter what else is happening, in the theater of this author's mind, the masks go on and are taken off. He stands in the wings, ready with the next one. He mugs for the audience. Points are made, but lightly, lightly. When you think about it, Rushdie's novels are a miracle. May the goddess grant him strength to write another one.

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Did George Washington Burn New York?

Americans disparaged the British as arsonists. But the rebels fought with fire too.

by Daniel Immerwahr



On July 9, 1776, General George Washington amassed his soldiers in New York City. They would soon face one of the largest amphibious invasions yet seen. If the British took the city, they'd secure a strategic harbor on the Atlantic Coast from which they could disrupt the rebels' seaborne trade.

Washington thus judged New York "a Post of infinite importance" and believed the coming days could "determine the fate of America." To prepare, he wanted his men to hear the just-issued Declaration of Independence read aloud. This, he hoped, might "serve as a fresh incentive."

But stirring principles weren't enough. By the end of August, the British had routed Washington's forces on Long Island and were preparing to storm Manhattan. The outlook was "truly distressing," he confessed. Unable to hold the city—unable even to beat back disorder and desertion among his own dispirited men—Washington abandoned it. One of his officers ruefully wished that the retreat could be "blotted out of the annals of America."

As if to underscore the loss, a little past midnight five days after the redcoats took New York on September 15, a terrible fire broke out. It consumed somewhere between a sixth and a third of the city, leaving about a fifth of its residents homeless. The conflagration could be seen from New Haven, 70 miles away.

New York's double tragedy—first invaded, then incinerated—meant a stumbling start for the new republic. Yet Washington wasn't wholly displeased. "Had I been left to the dictates of my own judgment," he confided to his cousin, "New York should have been laid in Ashes before I quitted it." Indeed, he'd sought permission to burn it. But Congress refused, which Washington regarded as a grievous error. Happily, he noted, God or "some good honest Fellow" had torched the city anyway, spoiling the redcoats' valuable war prize.

For more than 15 years, the historian Benjamin L. Carp of Brooklyn College has wondered who that "honest fellow" might have been. Now, in *The Great New York Fire of 1776: A Lost Story of the American Revolution*, he cogently lays out his findings. Revolutionaries almost certainly set New York aflame intentionally, Carp argues, and they quite possibly acted on instructions. Sifting through the evidence, he asks a disturbing question: Did George Washington order New York to be burned to the ground?

The idea of Washington as an arsonist may seem far-fetched. Popular histories of the American Revolution treat the "glorious cause" as different from other revolutions. Whereas the French, Haitian, Russian, and Chinese

revolutions involved mass violence against civilians, this one—the story goes—was fought with restraint and honor.

But a revolution is not a dinner party, as Mao Zedong observed. Alongside the parade-ground battles ran a "grim civil war," the historian Alan Taylor writes, in which "a plundered farm was a more common experience than a glorious and victorious charge." Yankees harassed, tortured, and summarily executed the enemies of their cause. The term *lynch* appears to have entered the language from Colonel Charles Lynch of Virginia, who served rough justice to Loyalists.

Burning towns was, of course, a more serious transgression. "It is a Method of conducting War long since become disreputable among civilized Nations," John Adams wrote. The Dutch jurist Hugo Grotius, whose writings influenced European warfare, forbade killing women and children, and judged unnecessary violence in seizing towns to be "totally repugnant to every principle of Christianity and justice."

Still, in the thick of war, the torch was hard to resist, and in North America, it was nearly impossible. Although Britain, facing a timber famine, had long since replaced its wooden buildings with brick and stone ones, the new United States was awash in wood. Its immense forests were, to British visitors, astonishing. And its ramshackle wooden towns were tinderboxes, needing only sparks to ignite.

On the eve of the Revolution, the rebel Joseph Warren gave a speech in a Boston church condemning the British military. Vexed British officers cried out "Oh! fie! Oh! fie!" That sounded enough like "fire" to send the crowd of 5,000 sprinting for the doors, leaping out windows, and fleeing down the streets. They knew all too well how combustible their city was.

The British knew it too, which raised the tantalizing possibility of quashing the rebellion by burning rebel towns. Although some officers considered such tactics criminal, others didn't share their compunctions. At the 1775 Battle of Bunker Hill, they burned Charlestown, outside Boston, so thoroughly that "scarcely one stone remaineth upon another," Abigail Adams wrote. The Royal Navy then set fire to more than 400 buildings in Portland, Maine (known then as Falmouth). On the first day of 1776, it set

fires in Norfolk, Virginia; the city burned for three days and lost nearly 900 buildings.

Redcoats' torching of American towns fed the revolutionary spirit precisely because it delegitimized the British empire.

Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* appeared just days after Norfolk's immolation. In it, Paine noted the "precariousness with which all American property is possessed" and railed against Britain's reckless use of fire. As Paine appreciated, torched towns made the case for revolution pointedly. "A few more of such flaming Arguments as were exhibited at Falmouth and Norfolk" and that case would be undeniable, Washington agreed. The Declaration of Independence condemned the King for having "burnt our towns."

In Norfolk, however, the King had help. After the British lit the fires, rebel Virginia soldiers kept them going, first targeting Loyalist homes but ultimately kindling a general inferno. "Keep up the Jigg," they cried as the buildings burned. From a certain angle, this made sense: The fire would deny the Royal Navy a port, and the British would take the blame. In early February a revolutionary commander, Colonel Robert Howe, finished the job by burning 416 remaining structures. The city is "entirely destroyed," he wrote privately. "Thank God for that."

A year later, the Virginia legislature commissioned an investigation, which found that "very few of the houses were destroyed by the enemy"—only 19 in the New Year's Day fire—whereas the rebels, including Howe, had burned more than 1,000. That investigation's report went unpublished for six decades, though, and even then, in 1836, it was tucked quietly into the appendix of a legislative journal. Historians didn't understand who torched Norfolk until the 20th century.

This was presumably by design: The Revolution required seeing the British as incendiaries and the colonists as their victims. Washington hoped that Norfolk's ashes would "unite the whole Country in one indissoluble Band."

Carp believes that what happened in Norfolk happened in New York. But how to square that with Washington's renowned sense of propriety? The

general detested marauding indiscipline among his men. Toward enemy prisoners, he advocated “Gentleness even to Forbearance,” in line with the “Duties of Humanity & Kindness.” And he deemed British-set fires “Savage Cruelties” perpetrated “in Contempt of every Principle of Humanity.” Is it thinkable that he disobeyed orders and set a city full of civilians aflame?

It becomes more thinkable if you look at another side of the war, Carp notes. In popular memory, the Revolutionary War was between colonists and redcoats, with some French and Hessians pitching in. But this version leaves out the many Native nations that also fought, mostly alongside the British. The Declaration of Independence, after charging the King with arson, indicted him for unleashing “merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.”

From the May 2022 issue: Daniel Immerwahr reviews a new history of World War II

This accusation—that Indigenous people fought unfairly—haunted discussions of war tactics. Redcoat attacks on American towns fed the revolutionary spirit precisely because they delegitimized the British empire, whose methods, John Adams wrote, were “more abominable than those which are practiced by the Savage Indians.”

Perhaps, but Adams’s compatriots, at least when fighting Indians, weren’t exactly paragons of enlightened warfare. A month after the Declaration of Independence complained about burned towns and merciless savages, the revolutionaries launched a 5,500-man incendiary expedition against the British-allied Cherokees, targeting not warriors but homes and food. “I have now burnt down every town and destroyed all the corn,” one commander reported.

This was hitherto the “largest military operation ever conducted in the Lower South,” according to the historian John Grenier. Yet it’s easily overshadowed in popular accounts by more famous encounters. The Pulitzer Prize–winning writer Rick Atkinson, in his painstakingly detailed, 800-page military history of the war’s first two years, *The British Are Coming*, spends just a paragraph on it. The Cherokee campaign was, Atkinson writes, a mere “postscript” to Britain’s short and unsuccessful siege of Charleston (even

though, by Atkinson's own numbers, it killed roughly 10 times as many as the Charleston siege did).

But the Cherokee campaign was important, not only for what it did to the Cherokees but for what it revealed about the revolutionaries. Washington brandished it as proof of how far his men were willing to go. The Cherokees had been "foolish" to support the British, he wrote to the Wolastoqiyik and Passamaquoddy peoples, and the result was that "our Warriors went into their Country, burnt their Houses, destroyed their corn and obliged them to sue for peace." Other tribes should take heed, Washington warned, and "never let the King's wicked Counselors turn your hearts against me."

Indigenous people did turn their hearts against him, however, and the fighting that followed scorched the frontier. In one of the war's most consequential campaigns, Washington ordered General John Sullivan in 1779 to "lay waste all the settlements" of the British-aligned Haudenosaunees in New York, ensuring that their lands were "not merely overrun but destroyed." Sullivan complied. "Forty of their towns have been reduced to ashes—some of them large and commodious," Washington observed. He commended Sullivan's troops for a "perseverance and valor that do them the highest honor."

It's hard, looking from Indian Country, to see Washington—or any of the revolutionaries—as particularly restrained. In the 1750s, the Senecas had given him the name "Conotocarious," meaning "town taker" or "town destroyer," after the title they'd bestowed on his Indian-fighting great-grandfather. Washington had occasionally signed his name "Conotocarious" as a young man, but he fully earned it destroying towns during the Revolutionary War. "To this day," the Seneca chief Cornplanter told him in 1790, "when that name is heard, our women look behind them and turn pale, and our children cling close to the neck of their mothers."

Carp acknowledges but doesn't linger over what the revolutionaries did on the frontier. As he shows, there's enough evidence from Manhattan itself to conclude that the New York conflagration was intentional.

To start, this was perhaps the least surprising fire in American history. Rumors swirled through the streets that it would happen, and Washington's

generals talked openly of the possibility. The president pro tempore of New York's legislature obligingly informed Washington that his colleagues would "chearfully submit to the fatal Necessity" of destroying New York if required. The fire chief buried his valuables in anticipation.

When the expected fire broke out, it seemed to do so everywhere simultaneously. Those watching from afar "saw the fire ignite in three, four, five, or six places at once," Carp notes. He includes a map showing 15 distinct "ignition points," where observers saw fires start or found suspicious caches of combustibles. The fire could have begun in just one place and spread by wind-borne embers, but to those on the scene it appeared to be the work of many hands.

As the fire raged, witnesses saw rebels carrying torches, transporting combustibles, and cutting the handles of fire buckets. Some offenders allegedly confessed on the spot. But, as often happens with arson, the evidence vanished in the smoke. The British summarily executed some suspects during the fire, others fled, and those taken into custody all denied involvement.

Months elapsed before the British secured their first major confession. They caught a Yankee spy, Abraham Patten, who'd been plotting to torch British-held New Brunswick. On the gallows, Patten confessed, not only to the New Brunswick scheme but also to having been a principal in the conspiracy to burn New York. "I die for liberty," he declared, "and do it gladly, because my cause is just."

Amy Zegart: George Washington was a master of deception

After Patten's execution, Washington wrote to John Hancock, the president of the Continental Congress. Patten had "conducted himself with great fidelity to our cause rendering Services," Washington felt, and his family "well deserves" compensation. But, Washington added, considering the nature of Patten's work, a "private donation" would be preferable to a "public act of generosity." He'd made a similar suggestion when proposing burning New York. Washington had clarified that, if Congress agreed to pursue arson, its assent should be kept a "profound secret."

It’s possible, given Carp’s circumstantial evidence, that New York radicals conspired to incinerate the city without telling the rebel command. Or perhaps Washington knew they would and feigned ignorance. Yet, for Carp, Patten’s confession and Washington’s insistence on paying Patten’s widow under the table amount to “a compelling suggestion that Washington and Congress secretly endorsed the burning of New York.”

Whoever burned the city, the act set the tone for what followed. As the war progressed, the British incinerated towns around New York and in the southern countryside. The rebels, for their part, fought fire with fire—or tried to. In 1778, Commodore John Paul Jones attacked an English port hoping to set it aflame, but he managed to burn only a single ship. Other attempts to send incendiaries to Great Britain were similarly ineffectual. British cities were too fireproof and too far for the revolutionaries to reach with their torches.

Vengeful Yankees had to settle for targets closer at hand: Native towns. In theory they were attacking Britain’s allies, but lines blurred. Pennsylvania militiamen searching for hostile Lenapes in 1782 instead fell on a village of pacifist Christian Indians, slaughtering 96 and burning it to the ground. If against the British the war was fought at least ostensibly by conventional means, against Indigenous people it was “total war,” the historian Colin G. Calloway has written.

That war continued well past the peace treaty signed in Paris—with no American Indians present—on September 3, 1783. Andrew Jackson’s arson-heavy campaigns against Native adversaries helped propel him to the presidency. Burning Indigenous lands was also key to William Henry Harrison’s election, in 1840. He won the White House on the slogan “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too”: Tyler was his running mate; “Tippecanoe” referred to the time in 1811 when Harrison’s troops had attacked an Indigenous confederacy and incinerated its capital.

Native Americans deserved such treatment, settlers insisted, because they always fought mercilessly, whereas white Americans did so only when provoked. Crucial to this understanding was a vision of the Revolution as a decorous affair, with Washington, venerated for his rectitude and restraint, at its head.

The legend of the pristine Revolution, however, is hard to sustain. The rebels lived in a combustible land, and they burned it readily, torching towns and targeting civilians. Like all revolutions, theirs rested on big ideas and bold deeds. But, like all revolutions, it also rested on furtive acts—and a thick bed of ashes.

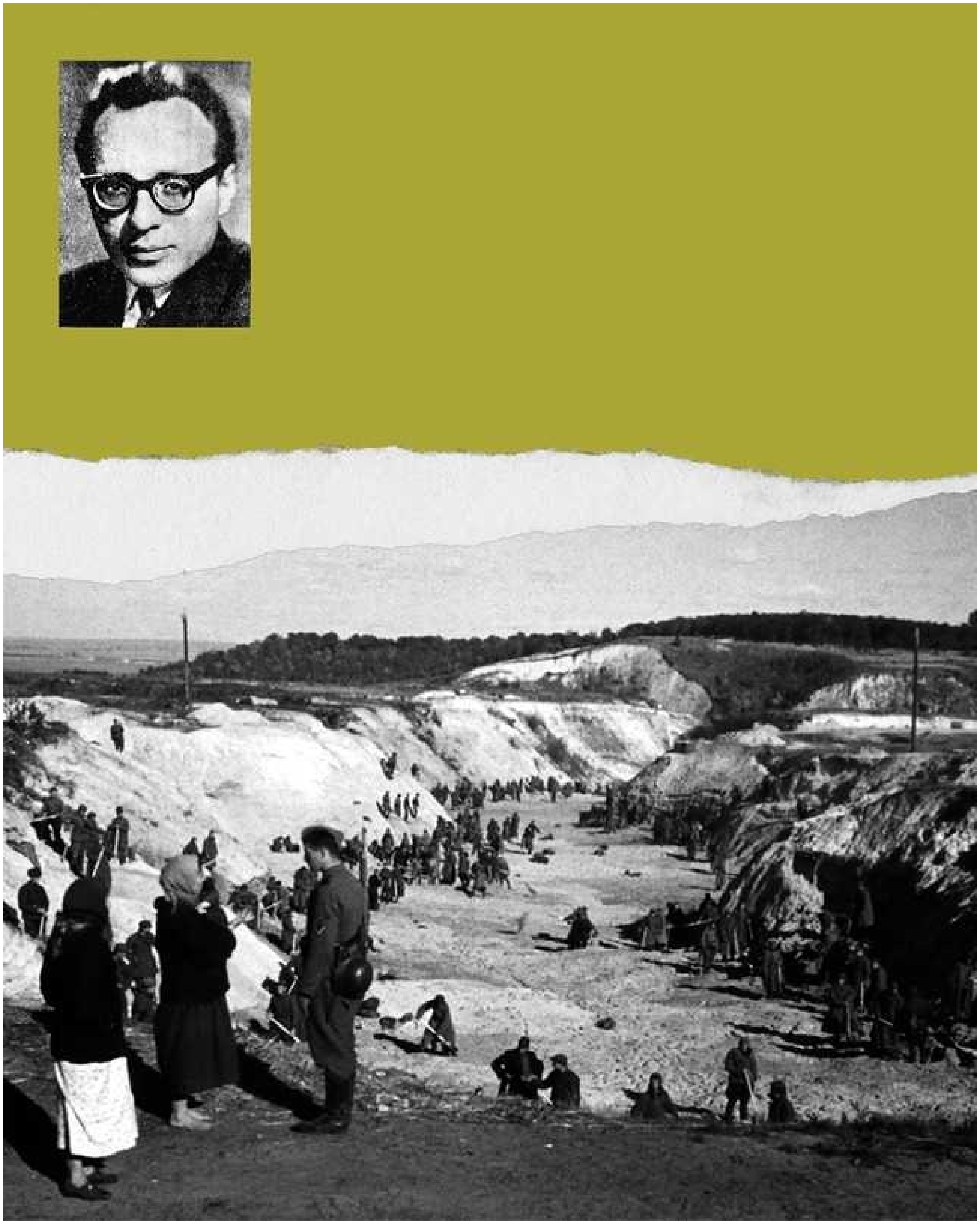
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The Masterpiece No One Wanted to Save

Censored and then forgotten, Anatoly Kuznetsov’s Babi Yar, about the Nazi occupation of Kyiv, is again painfully relevant.

by George Packer



Soviet prisoners of war cover a mass grave on October 1, 1941, after the German massacre of Jews at Babi Yar. (Illustration by Alicia Tatone. Sources: Johannes Hähle / Lifestyle Pictures / Alamy; Archivio GBB / Alamy)

“There is no possible way of responding to Belsen and Buchenwald,” Lionel Trilling wrote in 1948. “The activity of mind fails before the incommunicability of man’s suffering.” The crimes of both the Nazi and Soviet regimes in the 1930s and ’40s defied all precedents of analysis and feeling. No ism could account for them; no wisdom could make them bearable. Though inside the stream of history, they seemed to belong to a realm of occult, pure evil. Today we’re drowning in art and scholarship about Europe’s terrible 20th century, but for contemporaries of the events, there was no language.

This silence—fear, shame, denial, simple inarticulateness—was broken soon after the war by the emergence of a new prose genre: the literature of witness. If the crimes could not be comprehended, they could at least be told—by victims and survivors, in subjective first-person voices, all the more authoritative for their lack of rhetorical flourishes and theological frames: Primo Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz* and its sequel, *The Reawakening*; Anne Frank’s diary; Elie Wiesel’s *Night*; Charlotte Delbo’s trilogy, *Auschwitz and After*; Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*; and, in the 1990s, *I Will Bear Witness*, the Dresden diaries of the German Jewish scholar Victor Klemperer. These and a few other books now comprise a European canon of the worst that human beings have done and suffered.

That *Babi Yar*, by the Russian Ukrainian writer Anatoly Kuznetsov, never joined the list is a strange omission with a story of its own. The book’s subject, the Nazi occupation of Kyiv, and its literary qualities make *Babi Yar* every bit the peer of the canonical works of witness. Its fraught journey to publication half a century ago, and now to a reissue (with an introduction by Masha Gessen) amid the Russian assault on Ukraine, only adds to its power as enduring testimony. The book’s very typography carries the scars of its struggle to tell the truth.

Born in 1929, Kuznetsov lived on the outskirts of Kyiv with his Ukrainian schoolteacher mother and his grandparents (his Russian father, a policeman, abandoned the family) in a simple house with a garden. Close by, amid woods and cemeteries, was a long, steep ravine, called Babyn Yar by Ukrainian locals, where Kuznetsov and his friends played in the stream that trickled along the bottom. He was 12 when the Germans arrived, in September 1941. On September 28, they ordered Kyiv’s Jews to report to the

rail station near Babyn Yar the next day—the rumor was that the Jews would be deported to Palestine. At home, the boy and his grandfather heard the steady rattle of machine-gun fire from the ravine. For two days the shooting never let up, and it continued sporadically for the next two years as the ravine became the grave of more than 100,000 people—first Jews, then Roma, Soviet prisoners of war, Ukrainian nationalists, and anyone unlucky enough to be taken there—until the Red Army drove the Nazis out of Kyiv in November 1943.

George Packer: This is not 1943

Around the time of the city's liberation, Kuznetsov, now 14, began writing down everything he'd seen and heard during the occupation and war. "I had no idea why I was doing it," he later wrote; "it seemed to me to be something I had to do, so that nothing should be forgotten." When his mother found the notebook, she wept and urged him to one day turn it into a book.

Kuznetsov came of age with an abiding antipathy toward the Soviet regime, but he was willing to make compromises to succeed as a writer. In the 1950s, he joined the Communist Party and moved to Moscow; in 1960, he became a member of the Writers' Union. His fiction was hugely popular, and he accepted heavy censorship as the price of fame. All the while, with his childhood notebook in hand, he was gathering official documents and Kyiv inhabitants' personal memories for a novel about the Nazi occupation. On a visit to his hometown, he interviewed a woman named Dina Pronicheva, who had been one of just a few survivors to crawl out of the mountain of nearly 34,000 Jewish corpses in Babyn Yar, victims of those first two days of shooting, the largest single execution of the Holocaust. Kuznetsov located other witnesses too—prisoners of war, slave laborers.

But as he worked on the novel, he found himself stymied by the familiar Soviet rules of socialist realism ("what ought to have happened"), which required a stark contrast between Nazi villains and Soviet saviors. The result rendered "the truth of real life, which cried out from every line written in my child's notebook … trite, flat, false and finally dishonest." Kuznetsov had seen up close two regimes whose monstrous deeds and lies converged, and too many desperate or merely cruel Ukrainians doing unforgivable things.

He threw out the ideological stylebook and began to write as though he had to answer for every word.

In 1967, at the end of a brief liberalizing "thaw" between the reigns of Stalin and Brezhnev, and after party censors cut a quarter of Kuznetsov's manuscript, *Babi Yar: A Document in the Form of a Novel* was published in Moscow. The subtitle is misleading. The first sentence announces: "This book contains nothing but the truth." And yet so much of the truth had been excised (above all, the "anti-Soviet stuff") that Kuznetsov tried to withdraw it, in vain. Its revelations nonetheless caused a sensation in the U.S.S.R. and beyond.

Where other Holocaust memoirs are set in concentration camps that enclose victims and killers, *Babi Yar* focuses on ordinary people in an occupied city, all trying to survive the horror.

Knowing that the original manuscript's discovery could get him arrested, he photographed its pages and then buried it in the ground. After the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, in 1968, Kuznetsov resolved to abandon his country at any price. The next year, he agreed to inform on other Soviet writers and in exchange won permission for a visit to England on the pretext of researching a novel about Lenin. In London, Kuznetsov gave his KGB minder the slip and, with the rolls of 35-mm film sewn into the lining of his jacket, presented himself to a Russian-speaking *Daily Telegraph* journalist as a defector.

In 1970, the complete version of *Babi Yar* was published in English, with the censored parts restored in boldface and even more anti-Soviet passages, written between 1967 and 1969, added in square brackets. This typography allowed readers to trace in minute detail the Soviet erasure of history, along with Kuznetsov's development from personal memoirist to historical witness. The author's name on the English edition was now A. Anatoli. "I'm making an absolutely desperate effort to turn myself into another person," he explained to the CBS interviewer Morley Safer, gazing down morosely through Coke-bottle glasses, as if the effort was already doomed. In the freedom of the West, Kuznetsov published no new work; perhaps he needed the repressive Soviet atmosphere for inspiration. A nonperson in the Soviet

Union after his defection, he never became well known in the West, and died of a heart attack in London in 1979 at age 49.

B*abi Yar* enjoyed brief fame, but soon descended into obscurity. It is little discussed in Russia and Ukraine, perhaps because it delivers unwelcome truths about both countries. The book is fiercely candid about Soviet crimes and Red Army failures during the "Great Patriotic War"; it's also clear-eyed about the extent of Ukrainian collaboration, even as it vividly evokes Ukrainian suffering.

More than half a century after *Babi Yar*'s first appearance, it's impossible to read the book without replacing German artillery with Russian missiles, the ravine in Kyiv with the mass graves in Bucha and Izyum. We learn that German troops shit on the floors of houses they'd occupied, just as Russian troops have done. Some Ukrainians, we now know, have become refugees twice in 80 years. Jewish survivors of 1941 were killed during Russian attacks in 2022. Painfully relevant again, *Babi Yar* might at last find the wide readership it deserves.

From the October 2022 issue: George Packer on Ukraine's fight for survival

In the literature of witness, what makes *Babi Yar* both distinctive and elusive is the ambiguity of the situation it depicts. Where other Holocaust memoirs are set in concentration camps that enclose victims and killers, *Babi Yar* focuses on ordinary people in an occupied city, most of them neither Germans nor Jews, some complicit in evil, some avoiding or resisting it, all trying to survive the horror. The Nazi mass murder of Jews for which Babyn Yar and *Babi Yar* are known is described in only 20 pages, near the start of the book. This description from inside the ravine, based on Kuznetsov's interviews with Dina Pronicheva, is unbearably specific:

> **The Ukrainian policemen** up above **were apparently tired after a hard day's work**, too lazy to shovel the earth in properly, and once they had scattered a little in they dropped their shovels and went away. Dina's eyes were full of sand. It was pitch dark and there was the heavy smell **of flesh from the mass of fresh corpses**.

The censors' cuts elided the participation of Ukrainians in the crime. As for the final detail, also cut, perhaps it was too much for Soviet sensibilities.

Between shootings, exhumations, air raids, and acts of cannibalism, some of the most powerful moments are small ones, featuring the everyday characters who are the book's main concern. The narrator's Ukrainian grandfather, a poor laborer, hates the Soviets. Memories of Stalin's murderous famine of 1932–33 are still vivid. In quotations butchered by censors in 1967, the old man initially welcomes the arrival of the Nazis: **"And those people who have got used to working with their tongues and licking Stalin's arse—the Germans will get rid of them in no time. Praise the Lord, we have survived Thy ordeal, that Bolshevik plague!"** When Kyiv's Jews are ordered to assemble—right after a series of tremendous explosions and fires in the city, which some of the population blames on Jews but which are in fact a departing act of sabotage by the Soviet secret police—the boy starts thinking like his grandfather. **"Let 'em go off to their Palestine. They've grown fat enough here! This is the Ukraine; look how they've multiplied and spread out all over the place like fleas. And Shurka Matso—he's a lousy Jew too, crafty and dangerous. How many of my books has he pinched!"**

Shurka Matso is one of the boy's best friends. Nothing in this hellish tale is more disturbing than a 12-year-old's sudden transformation into a Jew hater. Kuznetsov's fidelity to his narrator's point of view won't let him soften the brutality of this betrayal. On the morning of September 29, the boy—who is forever dashing off to join a crowd of looters, check out a rumor, or try to sell limp cigarettes in the market—wakes up early to go watch the procession of Kyiv's Jews toward the tram station not far from the ravine. He notices how beaten-down they look, carrying bundles tied with string and wearing necklaces of onions. These people are too poor, too old, too young, and too sick to have been evacuated. He has a change of heart:

> How can such a thing happen? I wondered, **immediately dropping completely my anti-Semitism of the previous day**. No, this is cruel, it's not fair, and I'm so sorry for Shurka Matso; why should he suddenly be driven out like a dog? **What if he did pinch my books; that was because he forgets things. And how many times did I hit him without good reason?**

A few pages later, when the shooting starts and the "deportations" turn out to be mass executions, the narrator's mother and grandmother decide to hide a 14-year-old escapee from Babyn Yar. But before they can reach him, a neighbor woman gives him up to the Ukrainian police. For every act of courage and decency, there are far more of barbarism, and moments of mercy are rare. The narrator watches the boy being taken back to the ravine by a German soldier in a horse cart: "The soldier moved the hay aside to make the boy more comfortable. He put his rifle down on the straw, and the boy lay on his side resting on his elbow. He eyed me with his big brown eyes quite calmly and indifferently."

These observations, so exact and free of sentiment, have the unadorned power of a child's moral awakening. Telling the story through the eyes of the young Kuznetsov, which is not a narrative strategy but simply the truth, is a great advantage. Some passages read like a high-spirited adventure tale. Thanks to his age, the narrator can roam relatively unmolested around occupied Kyiv, scavenging for munitions or rotten potatoes (more than terror, the book's strongest sensation is hunger), committing numerous "crimes," and somehow escaping a Nazi bullet. Even his stint as an assistant to a buyer of old cart horses, who grinds the slaughtered animals into sausages for sale, is as fascinating as it is terrible. But these adventures end in flashes of insight, each harder to bear than the last.

Babi Yar reminds me in some ways of *Huckleberry Finn*. Just as Huck is able to see slavery with fewer illusions than the socialized grown-ups around him, the young narrator comes to realize that only luck separates him from the victims:

> I don't know whom to thank for my good luck: it's nothing to do with people; there is no God, and fate, that's just a pound of smoke. I am simply lucky.
>
> It was purely a matter of luck that I arrived in this world not a Jew, not a gypsy, not old enough to be sent to work in Germany, that bombs and bullets missed me, that patrols didn't catch me.

The emptiness and silence of this universe nearly suffocate him, but he's also allowed a glimpse of solidarity with suffering. In the end he rejects all

dictators, all ideologies, all better futures, all justified killings.

"No monument stands over Babi Yar," begins Yevgeny Yevtushenko's famous poem, written in 1961 after his friend Anatoly Kuznetsov brought him to Kyiv and showed him the ravine near his childhood home. The history of Babyn Yar is repeated erasure. First by the retreating Nazis, who tried to burn the human evidence of their crimes. Next by the victorious Soviets, whose ideology refused to recognize the Jewish essence of the Holocaust: They twice filled in the ravine to bury any memory of the vanished Jews, and later built the subway station, television center, and apartment blocks that are still there. Then the censors tried to sanitize Kuznetsov's account into a tale of Soviet virtue. Vladimir Putin's regime continues to lie about this history, exploiting the Holocaust to justify Russia's latest imperial war as one of "denazification." Ukrainians, fighting for survival under an assault that includes Russian propaganda, have never fully reckoned with the complexity of their own tortured past. Today the site of the ravine is an incoherent mess, a desultory patchwork of historical plaques and Holocaust kitsch.

The monument that stands over Babyn Yar is *Babi Yar*. In telling the truth, the book also exposes lies of the past and present. In looking with a child's amazement at the worst of humanity, it achieves a humanism without slogans or illusions. The boy's voice finally becomes that of the writer who lived through it all and found words for the unspeakable: "**I wonder if we shall ever understand that the most precious thing in this world is a man's life and his freedom? Or is there still more barbarism ahead? With these questions I think I shall bring this book to an end.** I wish you peace. [And freedom.]"

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Departments

- **The Commons: How Germany Avoided Its Own 'Lost Cause' Movement**
- **An Ode to Swearing**

How Germany Avoided Its Own ‘Lost Cause’ Movement

Readers respond to our December 2022 cover story and more.



Monuments to the Unthinkable

America still can’t figure out how to memorialize the sins of our history, Clint Smith wrote in the December 2022 issue. What can we learn from how Germany remembers the Holocaust?

Thank you for this engaging article. As I read it, I could feel Mr. Smith’s empathy for the victims of the Holocaust and their families. I’ve never had

much of an inclination to travel to Germany, but after reading this article, I would really like to follow the path he took. It would be great if *The Atlantic* could publish a sister article by a German writer providing their perspective on visiting museums and historical sites in America that pertain to the story of African Americans.

Eli Varol
Chicago, Ill.

I visited Dachau in 1985, when I was 20 and traveling through Europe. My friends and I were shocked that it was just a short walk from a town where “regular people” lived (and still do). It was incredibly disturbing.

After the tour, we made our way back to the train station. We had 45 minutes to wait before the next train to Munich, so we went to a café across the street. When we entered, two older men—in their late 50s or early 60s—came over to speak with us. They asked, in English, if we had toured the camp. They then proceeded to explain that they had grown up in Dachau and had been teenagers during the war. They tried to convince us that no one in the town had known what was going on. That was more disturbing than what we had seen in the camp. It was so obviously false: No one living in the town of Dachau could have been unaware of what was happening—the trains, the smoke, the smells.

I cannot describe how my blood still runs cold thinking of those two men, retired from their trades but spending their days waiting by the train station to attempt to convince strangers that the townspeople had been ignorant and innocent. I hope they eventually came to recognize their town’s complicity. As teenagers, they may have had no ability to make a difference, but as adults, they should have recognized the horror. That they were not doing so 40 years later was a shocking lesson for me.

Alison Mason
New York, N.Y.

I traveled to Germany in 2019 on vacation. At the time, concerns about rising anti-Semitism led many friends to question my decision. But we stuck to our plan and framed our trip around historical sites, visiting not just the memorials and museums that Smith discusses but also cities and towns where we learned a wealth of Jewish history—often in places where today a single Jewish person is unlikely to reside.

Memories of the atrocities of the Holocaust are present on every corner in Germany. They are hard to miss—and therefore hard to forget. But memorials and museums can only go so far. They can educate and start a conversation, but it's what people choose to do with this knowledge that will truly make a difference.

Debi Goldschlag
Silver Spring, Md.

In 2007, as a high-school student, I visited Auschwitz, Birkenau, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, and the Jewish Museum Berlin as part of an educational trip in the footsteps of the Holocaust survivor and Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel. Smith's description of standing in the gas chamber at Dachau moved me to tears. Capturing the complexities of remembrance is difficult, and Smith approaches the subject with deep thoughtfulness and sensitivity. With national-survey results indicating that nearly two-thirds of Millennial and Gen Z Americans do not know that 6 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, Smith's reporting is all the more crucial.

Cate Keller
Bethesda, Md.

I served as a soldier in Germany for seven years during the Cold War. "Monuments to the Unthinkable" made me reflect on the memorials to the Holocaust that I saw—they were overwhelming. I took no photographs; to do so seemed almost sacrilegious.

Anyone who has lived in Germany will recall that the World War II monuments there honor the victims—those killed in the Holocaust, those who died opposing Hitler's regime. There are no monuments to German generals, only graves of individual soldiers in cemeteries throughout the country. These are not heroic testaments to military deeds but somber places of final rest. As an observer once put it: "We do not honor them for what they did for Germany; we mourn that they had to pointlessly die."

Germans didn't avoid their own "Lost Cause" movement by accident. At the end of World War II, the Allies set policies to ensure that there would be no tolerance for anything memorializing German military traditions or the Nazi Party. The Allies understood the importance of ensuring that everyone, Germans especially, faced the realities of what took place from 1933 to 1945. And that meant ensuring that there would be no myths glorifying military figures.

This established an environment that required the defeated Germany to face responsibility for what happened. The defeated American South never faced such a reckoning, and we still live with the consequences.

Peter V. Huisking
Sierra Vista, Ariz.

I am from Germany and am now 86 years old. I was born during the Nazi Reich; I was 9 when the war ended and the "enemy" drove through our village. I didn't realize it was a liberation until later, but I've always been grateful for it.

Every year on the anniversary of Kristallnacht, November 9, my eldest daughter and I polish the 100 Stolpersteine in our neighborhood.

Jürgen Höhe
Cologne, Germany

Imagine my surprise when someone forwarded me the December issue of *The Atlantic*. The Stolperstein on the cover is that of my paternal aunt,

Marion Ehrlich; my parents named me to honor her memory.

Marion Ehrlich's brother, Gerd, was my father. When his mother, stepfather, and sister were deported to Auschwitz on November 29, 1942, my father went into hiding. Much has been written about his experience living as a "U-boat." He remained underground in Berlin until October 1943, when he was betrayed by a fellow Jew.

My mother and father donated my father's artifacts, which he carried with him as he escaped from Berlin to Switzerland, to the Jewish Museum Berlin. Among that collection is a gown worn by my aunt, Marion.

Thank you for highlighting an individual Stolperstein. It enhances the article by Clint Smith and adds personal context to the atrocities of the Holocaust.

Marion Ehrlich
Cockeysville, Md.

Behind the Cover

In this month's cover story, "We're Already in the Metaverse," Megan Garber considers the dark side of our immersive, always-on entertainment environment. For the cover, we asked the designer and illustrator Shira Inbar to interpret the experience of existing within the metaverse that Garber describes. Employing a retro-futuristic style—lurid colors, diffuse light, a granular texture—Inbar surrounds a figure with a hall-of-mirrors-like series of screens that stretches into an endless void. The result is a canny representation of an uncanny world.

— **Gabriela Pesqueira**, *Associate Art Director*

Corrections

"How Ireland Blundered Into the Modern World" (April 2022) originally stated that Charles Haughey, who became the minister for justice in 1961, oversaw Ireland's censorship of *Casablanca*. In fact, the country's censorship office had banned the film when it was first released, in 1943.

“Monuments to the Unthinkable” (December 2022) originally misstated the year in which Dachau was built. It was built in 1933.

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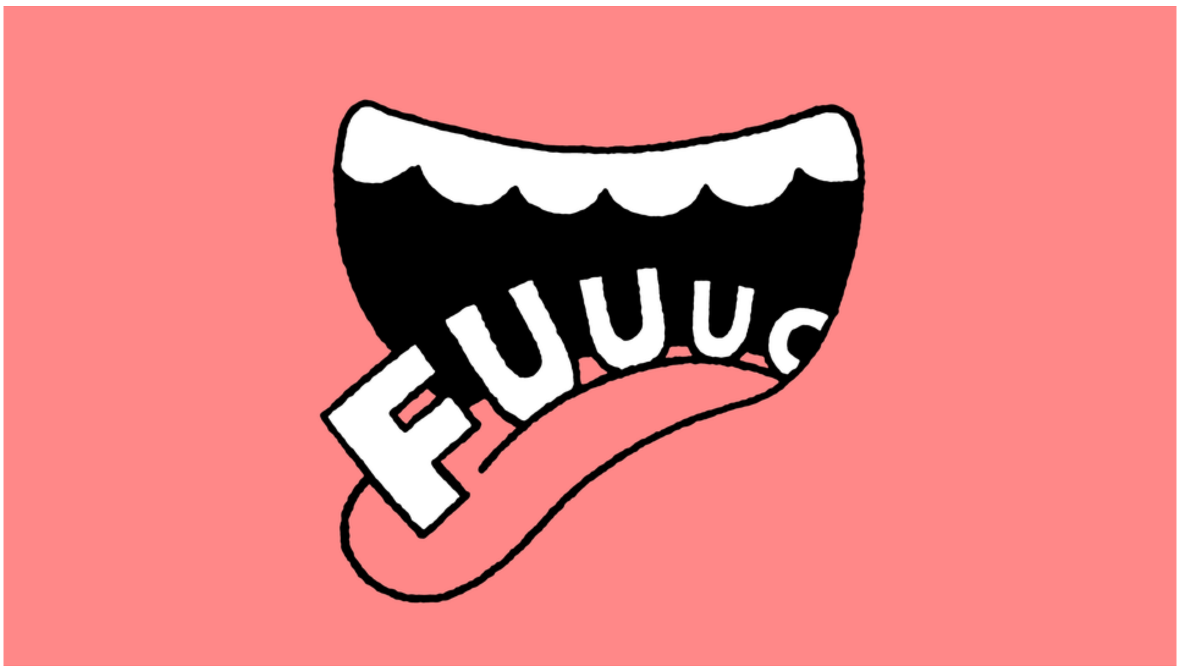
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An Ode to Swearing

A well-turned curse can remind you of the power of language.

by James Parker



The swears are here, the swears are there, the swears are fucking everywhere.

You've noticed it, I'm sure. How it started with the band names (Fucked Up, the Fucking Champs) and then migrated into the mainstream: *Go the Fuck to Sleep*, the self-help books about unfucking yourself and not giving a fuck, and the ever-growing tolerance for *fuck*s on TV, such that we seem to be moments away from having a weatherman tell us that there's an absolute

motherfucker of a cold front coming in. Aren't we completely fucked-out, at this point? Desacralized, desensitized, fucking numb?

Not quite. Or not yet. Because there's cultural swearing, which is merely late-stage capitalism at work, an arousal probe, prodding us in our jaded consumer receptors, blah blah blah. And then there's the swearing that happens between people. Between drinkers. Between soccer players. Between shoppers in Best Buy on Black Friday, and drivers on the Massachusetts Turnpike. And this kind of swearing is marvelously intimate and alive. Here you can be rhythmical, poetical. You can discharge your fury or your desire, all of it, in a single puff of profanity. You can shoot blue bolts of language like a warlock, piercing the force field of your antagonist and pushing him backwards.

Swearing is an art, like everything else. You can overdo it, you can underdo it, and you can do it just right. You can swear at your grandmother, and experience as if for the first time the unholy power of the old words. You can swear at your dog, and he won't notice. Once, on a beach in California, with electronic beats pinging and bass belching in the air around us, a dreadlocked stranger placed his hands upon my shoulders; gazed deep, deep, deep into my eyes; and said (Northern Irish accent): "I don't know who y'are … But I focking *love ya*." Then we hugged, and he entered my brain chemistry forever.

My dad's a good swearer. I've never heard him swear in anger; rather, he will swear fondly and retrospectively, recalling a moment when he might have gotten angry. "And I thought to myself, *Well, that's just not fucking good enough!* " It's very effective. Emotion recollected in tranquility, as advocated by Wordsworth.

You can establish familiarity, even make friends, with swearing. Start gently. English people are lucky in this respect: We have recourse to the not-quite-harmless intensifier *bloody*—as in "I'm bloody freezing!"—which is somewhere between a *fuck* and a *goddamn*. Swearing without swearing.

Here's the point: Swearing is personal. How much you swear, and with (or at) whom—that's really your own thing. And given the much-to-be-sworn-at

state we’re in, and the state of the swear economy itself, I’d counsel thrift. Save those beautiful *fuck*s for when you need them.

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Poetry

- **In Flight**

In Flight

by Rae Armantrout



1

“Engage in an activity,”
one said.

Then one said,
“Believe in your feelings.”

It would be easy to believe
our bodies

were being operated
remotely,

like drones
receiving instructions,

no doubt coded,
on the fly.

2

It was possible to feel
you had been saved
by paisleys

then by natural fabrics
in muted shades.

Both promised new lives.

Once I was saved
from monotony

and hate

by a square of sun

on the overhead compartment

tinged faint yellow
and lime.

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